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#224 MARCH 2012

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Contributors Desslock, Rob Zacny, Richard Cobbett, Florence Ion, Andy Mahood, Swen Vincke, Ryan Scott, Phil Flick, Chris Perry, Chris Thursten, Will Porter, Nathan Grayson, Graham Smith, Tim Stone, Tom Francis, Henry Winchester, Rich McCormick, Tom Senior, Chris Donlan, Jon Blyth, Steve Hogarty, Seamus Bellamy, Gordon Ung, Alex Castle, Andrew Beck

Edit Squirrel Tabasco

ART
Art Director Dan Fitzpatrick
Designers Monique Convertito, Mark Rosenthal, Boni Uzilevsky
Photographers Samantha Berg, Alex Chousa, Mark Madeo, Barak Sharama, Kevin Sharp

BUSINESS
Vice President, Consumer Media
Kelley Corten, kcorten@futureus.com
Publisher
Kristen Salvatore, ksalvatore@futureus.com
Vice President, Sales & Business Development
Nate Hunt, nhunt@futureus.com
National Director of Sales
Isaac Ugay, iugay@futureus.com
Regional Sales Managers
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Stacy Gaines, sgaines@futureus.com
Greg Ryder, gryder@futureus.com
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Account Executive
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Advertising Coordinator
Heidi Hapin, hhapin@futureus.com

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FUTURE US, INC.
4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400
South San Francisco, CA 94080, (650) 872-1642
www.futureus.com

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30 Monmouth St., Bath, Avon,
Ba1 2bw, England
www.futureplc.com
Tel +44 (0) 1225 442244 (Bath)
Tel +44 (0) 7042 4000 (London)

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"Don't worry Georgie," I said. "This human scum'll get what's comin' to him. Let's get outta here. Go hit the coconut bar." I grabbed a scruff of hair on George's enormous, simian back. "Come on you big fool. We'll get 'em later." We turned around, and I lit a fresh cigarette. "Stupid ape," yelled Senator Clavis. "Monkeys don't smoke!" I stopped, my back still facing him. "This one does, Mr. Clavis. This one does." And then we left.

Scoring TOR

It's always been *PC Gamer*'s policy to play games through to completion at least once before writing our reviews. But as games become increasingly complex and open-ended, "completion" isn't easy to define—particularly in the case of MMOs. Not only do they require hundreds and conceivably even thousands of hours to explore every narrative path with every class and character configuration, but they also evolve over time. And the pre-baked content available at launch is only one aspect of a game like *The Old Republic*, whose creative community and ambitious post-launch plans will determine its long-term fate—and whether or not you'll still be playing it a year from now.

So when we review an MMO, we have to balance respect for the game (by experiencing enough content to assign a fair verdict) with our readers' desire to read our review of that game within their lifetimes. You demand a comprehensive, exhaustive evaluation, but you don't pay us to take our sweet time.

Our initial MMO review scores (such as our verdict on *The Old Republic* in this month's review on page 60) reflect how well a game lives up to its promises at launch, and as such it is not subject to change. But launch day for MMOs is only the beginning. That's why we created our Massive Attack section: because MMOs are only as good as their latest iteration. *PC Gamer* has correspondents monitoring new content, new game mechanics, and all the amazing stuff people do in every multiplayer game we've ever reviewed that's still online today.

PC gaming isn't like gaming on any other platform, and MMOs aren't like any other kind of games. So the traditional preview-review-score-and-snore cycle doesn't work for their developers, for us, or for you. *TOR* left the dock in excellent shape; you can count on *PC Gamer* to let you know—in print and online—if it stays that way.

LOGAN DECKER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Twitter: @logandecker

PLAYLIST

Evan Lahti
Senior Editor
I'm amazed at how well *Tribes: Ascend*'s devs have kept up with community feedback in the beta. It's patched practically every week!

Chris Comiskey
Managing Editor
Skyrim shows no signs of releasing its hooks in my flesh. Sixty hours in and I feel like I just started. God help me.

Josh Augustine
Associate Editor
The name's Nine. Cypher Nine. Imperial Agents are cool, deadly, and (in the case of my character in *The Old Republic*) so very nice and huggable.

Tyler Wilde
Associate Editor
My longest *BF3* headshot traveled 1,241 meters as it arced over Wake Island and into my personal record book. Now to beat it!

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THE TOP 100 GAMES OF ALL TIME 48

Feeling listless? Settle down with a catalog of the 100 games we recommend over all others, and find out what made the cut in 2011!

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Meet the Tinkerer: a time-traveling clone with a robot butler!

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Was it worth the wait? See our verdict!

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Forward-thinking power earns Falcon Northwest's latest dream system a spot in the top tier of gaming PCs

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BACK CHATTER

- *Battlefield 3*'s balancing is amusing. The Russian jets are two generations ahead of the American jets, and far more maneuverable with longer range missiles. ***Funkosapien***

- The entire MMO RPG genre is in need of a serious facelift. We have an army of MMOs running on 5 year old engines, mediocre graphics, no physics and a hollow thankless story. ***Anthony Kubli***

- "'Why make a good looking game that won't run on consoles when we can make a crappy looking one that'll run fine and let the PC community fix it?' – Bethesda" ***Francisco Medina***

- *Lego Minecraft: The Game*, anyone? ***Bean Elkom***

- It's amazing how everyone talks trash about *Call of Duty*, yet everyone seems to be playing it. ***Brian Stinson***

- I'm not sure whether the best part about *Tribes: Ascend* is airshotting someone with a Spinfusor in HD, or hearing them yell "Shazbot!" afterwards. ***Will Uhl***

- To the people who think *Terraria*'s *Minecraft* clone isn't worth the time: It's more a *Minecraft*-inspired *Castlevania*. It's all about action. ***Craig Fender***

Goodbye Galaxies

I know that *Star Wars Galaxies* has to be taken down. When *World of Warcraft* hit gold it changed the MMO landscape forever. *Galaxies* tried to adjust, and managed to survive post-NGE release, but when *The Old Republic* was announced, it was all but over. It's a bittersweet farewell, as nobody can ever match the fun I've had in that game. Since the beginning, I loved taking a day just exploring a planet and earning XP. Or checking my current ship and heading out into the furthest reaches of space for some decent combat. You could get lost in the world of *Galaxies*, and that's what was so fun about it: creating your own stories. I hope it influences *The Old Republic*, especially when it comes to space combat.

Now that *Galaxies* is shutting down, what are we X-Wing and TIE Fighter fans supposed to do? With excitement for what's coming and sadness for days gone by, I say goodbye and thank you to *Galaxies*.
Ray Anthony Pitts

Ahh...Life Day memories.

We're sorry for your loss, dearest Pittsy. It's true: all good things must come to an end, and that goes triple for 10-year-old games which require costly server maintenance to keep in working order. We were happy to see, however, that Galaxies *wasn't just Alderaaned into extinction without a proper send-off. Players from the beginning were invited to re-activate their accounts free of charge and bear witness to the glorious conclusion: a digitally inserted ghost of Hayden Christensen.*

Old friends: reinstalled

I've been subscribed to *PC Gamer* since 1995. It's become an addiction that I invariably can't kick, even though my days of PC gaming are sadly long gone. These days, I'm a father of two. Between work and the kids, having time to sit and *just play a game* is ancient history. How-ever, I still read every issue, and although I am unsure when Reinstall first began, it is now a must-read for me. With every Reinstall I am time-warped back to the days when I heavily gamed on PC. I can recall the costs I went through for a Voodoo card and the expense of buying my first "big screen" 17-inch CRT. Keep rocking the Reinstalls. They are loved.
Lucas Freeman

We demand our readers' unquestioning loyalty and have no problem resorting to threats and intimidation if necessary, but it's always a delight to have it offered to us voluntarily. Thank you! Three pages is a lot to devote to a single game from the past, but no other gaming platform has anything close to the rich history of PC gaming, and its classics are worth revisiting and celebrating every month. We're glad you enjoy it!

THE HOT MAIL

Skyrim Scam

Here's my main reason why PC gaming isn't dead and will always thrive. The digital fidelity of the attached screenshot being reason number one! I love the look of *Skyrim* and have been a fan of the series since *Daggerfall*, so I took this shot myself and posted it to Facebook. Now I've gotten more than a few friends and family commenting on the picture, and wondering where I took it! (Some are even calling me Ansel Adams!) If a PC game can make non-gamers believe this image is real, what better proof is there that our platform is the leader? This image was taken after modifying the game to increase grid loading distances, FOV at 95 percent and a few .ini tweaks! ***Jon Oaks***

We love the PC's power and flexibility too, but now we're even more excited about the the idea of pranking elderly and non-gaming loved ones with just a few tweaks! "Hey Ma, did you see this first-person news footage? There's a war breaking out on Wake Island! Oh, and have you seen what happened to 'New' Vegas?! Absolutely tragic!"

Here at *PC Gamer*, we believe all artists should be properly compensated, so Jon's getting a copy of *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* for being such a talented trickster. Ping us at letters@pcgamer.com with a question, comment, or rage-fueled rant to earn your chance to win next month's **PRIZE OF MYSTERY**!

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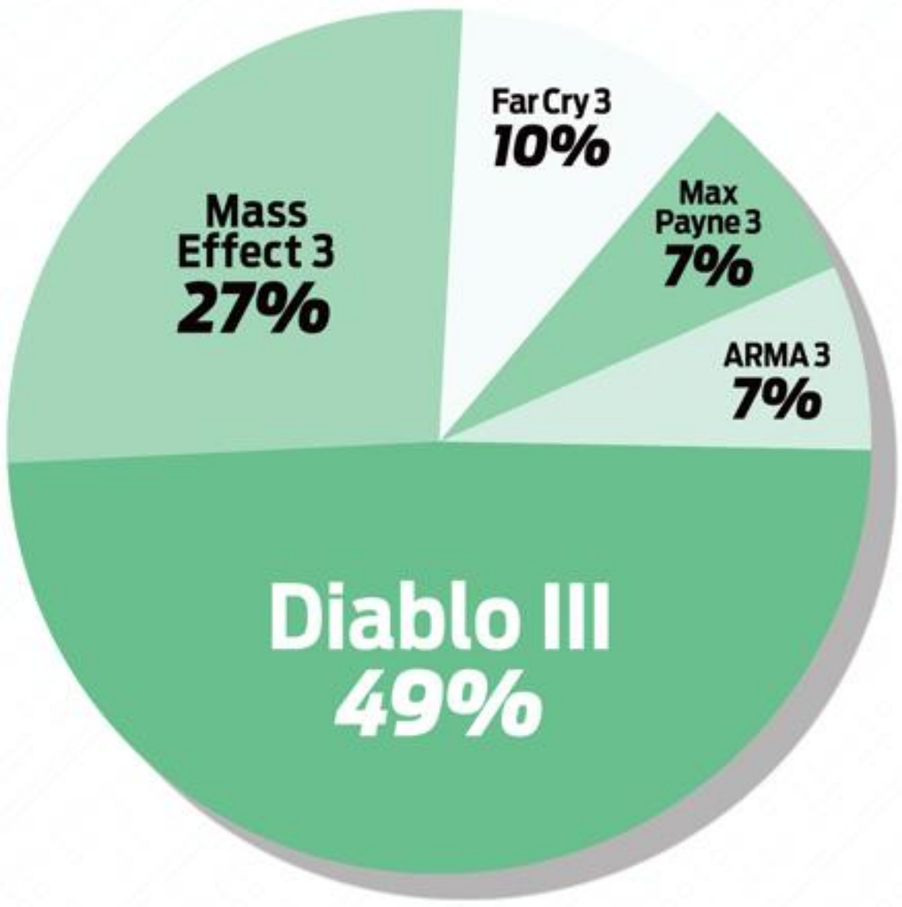
PC GAMER POLL

What "3" are you most looking forward to in 2012?



How could you possibly think that?

Far Cry 3, so I can walk around and stare at the water. ***Bob Rios***

Battlefield is still my favorite "3" right now, I can't get enough. ***Alex Wawroski***

Mass Effect 3, because I feel like my boyfriend will neglect me less if he plays this one. ***Laura Mae Schwartz***

I've been a *Max Payne* fan for too long, excluding the movie of course! ***Chris Allen***

I choose *Diablo III*. It's been a very long time since I played a new game in that gerne. The rest are just shooters. ***Jacek Kaminski***

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE THREE YOU IDIOTS! ***Michael Radnan***

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BACK CHATTER

- So much *Battlefield 3* bashing because it forces gamers to use Origin...well, *Half-Life 2* forced us to use some strange thing called Steam. ***RoughConcept***
- Releasing old *Final Fantasy* games would be a better idea than trying to revive *Final Fantasy XIV*. ***SilverMoonFlare***
- I'm all about crossing the platforms in order to make this game as profitable as it can be, but *Mass Effect 3* must be done so the PC takes full advantage. ***Sir_Recon***
- Giddy with excitement for *MechWarrior Online*. I've always said they should make a *World of Tanks*-style game with mechs...our prayers have been answered! ***London***
- I'm curious to see what they can do with a *Doctor Who* game. *The Adventure Games* were very clunky and kiddie-oriented, as the series has gotten increasingly complex and adult in its themes. ***Quasar***

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What are we X-Wing and TIE Fighter fans supposed to do?

Launch GOGgles

I just wanted to thank you for cluing me in to the gold mine that is Good Old Games (www.gog.com). For years I've been kicking myself for getting rid of gems like *Arcanum* and I was finally able to get the *Total Annihilation* expansions that I passed on many, many years ago. I had to restrain myself from rebuying half of the games that I've parted with over the years. ***Dave Carlson***

We're always happy to pimp the fine folks at Good Old Games! That said, it's worth noting that the site has recently added new releases to its already fantastic roster of yore, with (relatively) recent stuff like The Witcher 2. *As always, the cost is minimal and the DRM is MIA.*

The best RTS

Other than *StarCraft 2*, what's the best RTS game out there? I assume you're going to say "nothing"...so, are there any promising RTS titles in the pipeline this year? ***Jack Gray***

"Nothing?" How about the original StarCraft*?! AHAHA—we kid. You may've noticed that* Rome: Total War *actually outranks* SC2 *in our Top 100 Games of All Time list, and* Company of Heroes *remains one of our highest scored games ever. And on the horizon, there's* Command & Conquer Generals 2 *and, um...*StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm.

Hack the planet

While the "You've been HACKED!" feature in Massive Attack [Holiday 2011] was excellent for the most part, I'm wondering why there was nothing about getting an authenticator. This should be recommended to *WoW* players as a good idea toward hack prevention, or at least one of the first steps after being hacked.

It may not be a 100% guarantee, but for only $6.50, it's certainly worth the greatly reduced risk, especially for people who plan to play multiple Blizzard games. I'm not sure if any of the other MMO companies plan to offer their own, but they really should! ***Daniel Dance***

Good point, Daniel! You can never be too cautious. That reminds us: for more security tips, please send us your address, bank statement, Social Security number, a notarized letter giving us power of attorney, and a small blood sample...just for our records.

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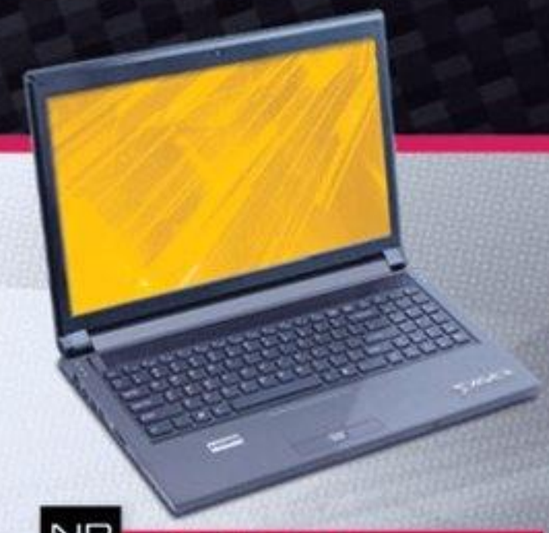

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Angels over flaming cliffs

The Virtual Blue Angels test the limits of online aerobatics *by Andy Mahood*

Most PC gamers associate combat jet sims like *Lock On: Flaming Cliffs* with laser-guided bombs, heat-seeking missiles, and fuselage-shredding cannon fire. After all, what's the point of lighting the afterburners on a $30 million dollar jet fighter if you don't get to blow something up?

A nine-member team of flight sim enthusiasts from across the U.S. (along with one Aussie) has an answer for that. Formed in 2004, this group has honed a remarkable online homage to the U.S. Navy's Flight Demonstration Squadron, better known as the Blue Angels. Employing a modified version of Eagle Dynamics' *Lock On: Flaming Cliffs 2*, the Virtual Blue Angels (www.virtualblueangels.net) have participated in multiple live events which showcase their remarkable formation flying and aerobatic skills.

A dedication to aviation

The team's level of dedication borders on obsessive. "We get together between three and five times per week depending on whether we have an online demo coming up or not," explains VBA Commanding Officer Bob "Kato" Tyler. "After a quick brief outlining what we want to achieve that day, we either fly the whole demo from start to finish, or go up in separate groups as the Diamond (Blue Angels one through four) and Solos (Blue Angels five and six) to work on specific maneuvers."

Each practice session runs about three hours, and the demos he's referring to are full reenactments of Blue Angels air show routines, from diamond formation take-offs to knife-edge solo passes. If you've ever taken in a real-life Blue Angels show, where gravity and separation are mostly unheeded suggestions, you can already appreciate the dramatics that unfold here: formation loops, barrel rolls, and coordinated low-altitude maneuvers which might actually blow a few socks off.

As someone who struggles with basic KC-135 aerial refueling procedures—"stop wiggling the damned tanker!"—I have mad respect for anyone who can fly simulated F/A-18 Hornets wingtip-to-wingtip while performing complex aerial tricks, especially

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A single hiccup can spell disaster when you fly this close. Hey dude, what was your ping reading again?

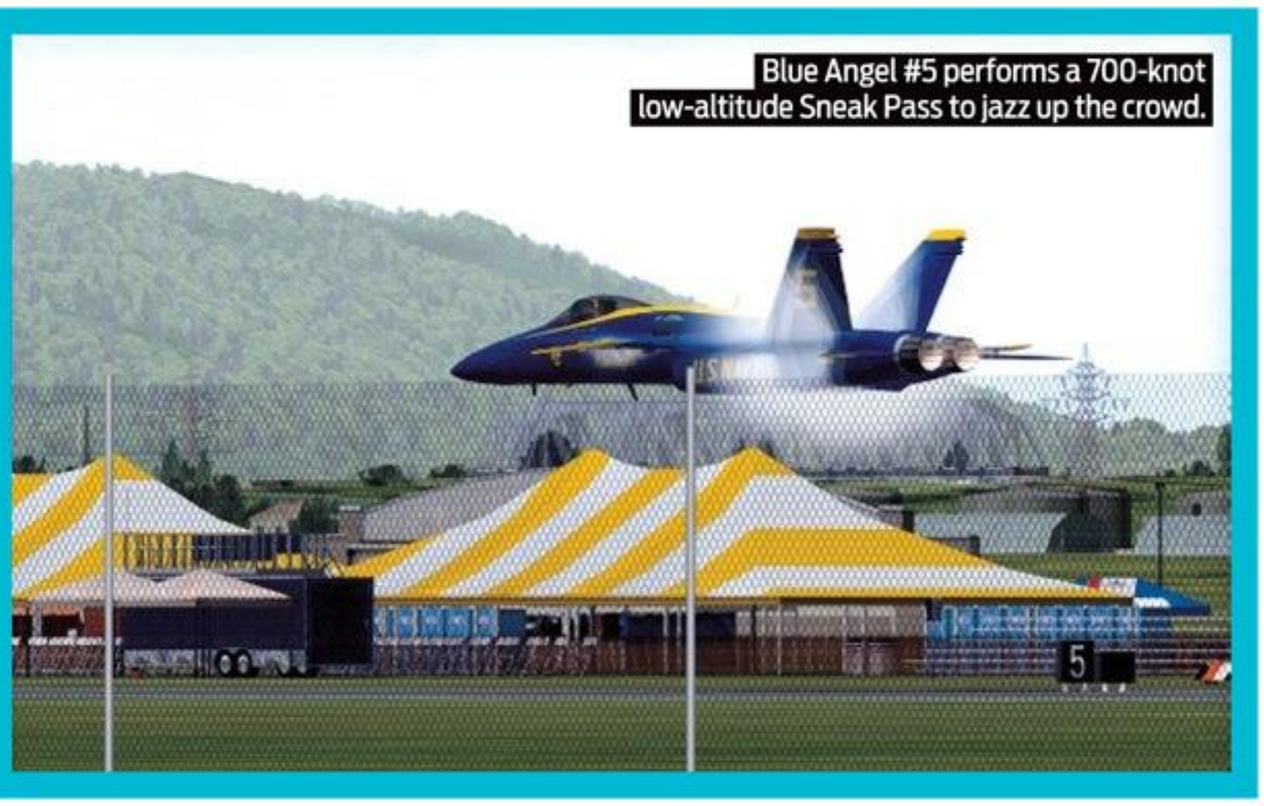
That's show business

It's one thing to practice simulated aerobatic maneuvers with your friends, but it doesn't amount to a proper Blue Angels tribute without a bona fide *live* air show somewhere in the mix.

That's where VFAT comes in. The "Virtual Festival of Aerobatic Teams" is an annual online airshow performed and viewed globally over a three-day period in December. Bob "Kato" Tyler offers some history: "The Virtual Blue Angels performed at the first VFAT show in 2005, when the fastest people with a mouse were the lucky few to see the demos live (which limited the audience to something less than 50 people). Today, the VFAT staff has greatly optimized the audience experience by streaming the performances live to any number of spectators. So the only thing viewers need to do now is to browse over to the VFAT homepage—www.virtual-airshows.com—and click the streaming link to watch in their favorite browser."

Believe it or not, there are six internet-connected pilots performing this signature Blue Angels Delta Roll.

It's called a Double Farvel and hamfisted pilots better not try it.


Blue Angel #5 performs a 700-knot low-altitude Sneak Pass to jazz up the crowd.

when you throw in the prospect of internet lag as a deadly showstopper.

"There has been a close shave here and there, but with online flying there is always the chance of a warp or lag causing one or more of the jets to suddenly move in one direction or another," says Tyler. "We have definitely seen that from time to time." Eliminating lag is one of the key reasons the team selected *Flaming Cliffs 2* as their sim platform.

"*Lock On* is great since the netcode is very well done," Tyler continues. "We can have six aircraft in the air at the same time with very little lag. We have tried every other simulator available, but since we need to fly the minimum 18-inch wingtip-to-canopy separation (as seen in the Diamond 360 maneuver), we have found *Flaming Cliffs 2* to be the sim of choice for keeping all our jets stable enough to achieve this."

Keeping up the flight

The Virtual Blue Angels don't actively seek out new members. But, when they do, the entry criteria are rigorous and very specific. "To become a regular VBA team member is a process unto itself, and most folks think they need ace flying skills even to be considered," explains Tyler. "What we are really looking for are folks that can interact well with the other team members, and add to a positive atmosphere. We will teach new members the stick-and-rudder skills they need, because several of the techniques that are used for combat flying don't translate all that well to smooth formation flying."

All of this takes a level of skill and dedication that transcends hobby. In fact, the last team member to leave the group was Jonathan "Harm" Jackson who moved on to the U.S. Naval Academy and hopes to fly real jets for the Navy in the future. I suspect he'll do well at it. ■

10 things we'd like to see in The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

Here are our most sought-after requests for Bethesda's next free-roaming, cabbage collecting sim in Tamriel.

1 Another time, another place

For the next game, the time jump should be at least 200 years between *Skyrim* and *Oblivion*, giving the global changes brought into effect during your jaunt in the northern regions time to seep into society.

A trip back to High Rock would be amazing, the Breton country not seen since *Daggerfall*. It's got license to mix up flora and fauna as much as Cyrodiil, and Breton culture is defined by enjoyably sneaky politics.

Odds: 2:1

2 Stranger in a strange land

Akavir is the homeland of dragons and the Blades, so it allows for just enough fan-favorite features to feel familiar. Transplanting Tamrielic characters would be a way to rekindle Morrowind's sense of another world, and to break away from Tolkien-inspired Tamriel for good.

An in-game book, Disaster at Ionith, tells of an Imperial expedition that encounters an unknown and unfathomable new form of sorcery out in the wastes of Akavir. The *Elder Scrolls*' magic has always been the source of its weirdest and most wonderful lore; here's an opportunity to explore that strangeness even further.

Odds: 50:1

YOU SUGGEST

I can't help but notice that a lot of people in-game talk about the southern Khajiit lands.
@Underwood Lynch

I'd love a return to Morrowind.
@Purpose Gaming

3 Give us total control

Let's see an end to invulnerable essential characters, as long as we're somehow warned that their death will have an impact. Should the worst happen, the story should change. Obviously, fully-realized consequences for every potential chain of events is too much to ask, but a few extra touches here and there isn't out of the question. Show us—rather than telling us—that killing our Blades contact because we fancy his neat-looking shoes has doomed the world.

Odds: 100:1

4 Deeper, not broader

Instead of going *bigger*, Bethesda should focus on expanding existing materials: more handcrafted dungeons, more quests, more chances to impact the lives and livelihoods of the people we meet over the course of our adventures. *Oblivion* and *Skyrim* both have major world events that punctuate whatever else the player might be doing. Why not expand this to include several different overlapping systems, each with their own distinct rewards? We could fight a massive Dwemer construct in the planes of Aetherius!

Odds: 10:1

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5 Revamp followers

As much as we love them, *Skyrim*'s followers are useless. They repeat the same five lines of dialog throughout their brief lives, staring blankly as you request that they stop bumbling through your house knocking over your plates. Bethesda should give each follower BioWare-style backstories with attendant quests, conversations, and choices.
Odds: 18:1

6 Group combat and squad commands

The moments where *Skyrim* breaks out into open warfare are a sweet change of pace from dungeon-crawling. Make larger battles more frequent, and with a range of tactical options. These could work like Shouts—instant-cast special abilities that tell your AI buddies when to charge, what formation to adopt, and what abilities to use. The AI could scale up encounters based not only on your level, but how many friends you've brought with you.
Odds: 14:1

7 Rethink stealth

A high level of sneaking in *Elder Scrolls* is licence to do whatever you please. This reached its peak with *Skyrim*, where a late-game perk forces NPCs' eye-line above waist level, rendering anyone canny enough to crouch invisible even in broad daylight. As much as we enjoy the sight of a guard who's had all his clothes stolen, it's time for a change. Throw out skill-based stealth in favor of a system based on light and noise. Rudimentary alarm systems should allow guards to alert others in the event of an emergency, but to compensate, dungeons should offer a greater array of possible approaches.
Odds: 20:1

8 Consequences for magic

A major part of Elder Scrolls lore is concerned with the various Aedra and Daedra and their involvement with the living, particularly with regard to magic. As it happens, we rarely feel the effect of a Daedric deal, even as we're summoning them to do our bidding. So how about this: restore spellcrafting in the form of customizable Daedric bargains with positive and negative effects. If we want to zap our foes with a ball of lightning, fine: but in order to make the spell in the first place, we need to sacrifice a companion, or have a random NPC die.
Odds: 70:1

9 Free-roaming? Try free-running

The basics of running and jumping haven't changed since *Morrowind*, and they're well overdue for a tune-up. No more climbing mountains by strafing and hammering the jump key: let's have first-person, *Mirror's Edge*-style climbing. No more glitching your way on to a rooftop and raining fireballs and arrows down on hapless enemies below: we want *Assassin's Creed*-style chases. These could be tied to skills and equipment to prevent heavily armored knights from suddenly turning into Ezio when cornered. It'd finally justify Acrobatics, at least.
Odds: 150:1

10 Online profiles, not co-op

As they are, the *Elder Scrolls* games are far from single-player. Sure, you can't play with your friends directly—but sharing stories is a huge and essential part of their appeal. We'd rather Bethesda focus its attention on building a game that creates those experiences than tack-on a multiplayer component. That said, why not build an online journal and character sheet that tracks and writes up your progress? No need for awkward social media integration: just let us throw our best friends a link to the time we beat a dragon to death with an enchanted pickaxe. While naked.
Odds: 4:1 ■

YOU SUGGEST

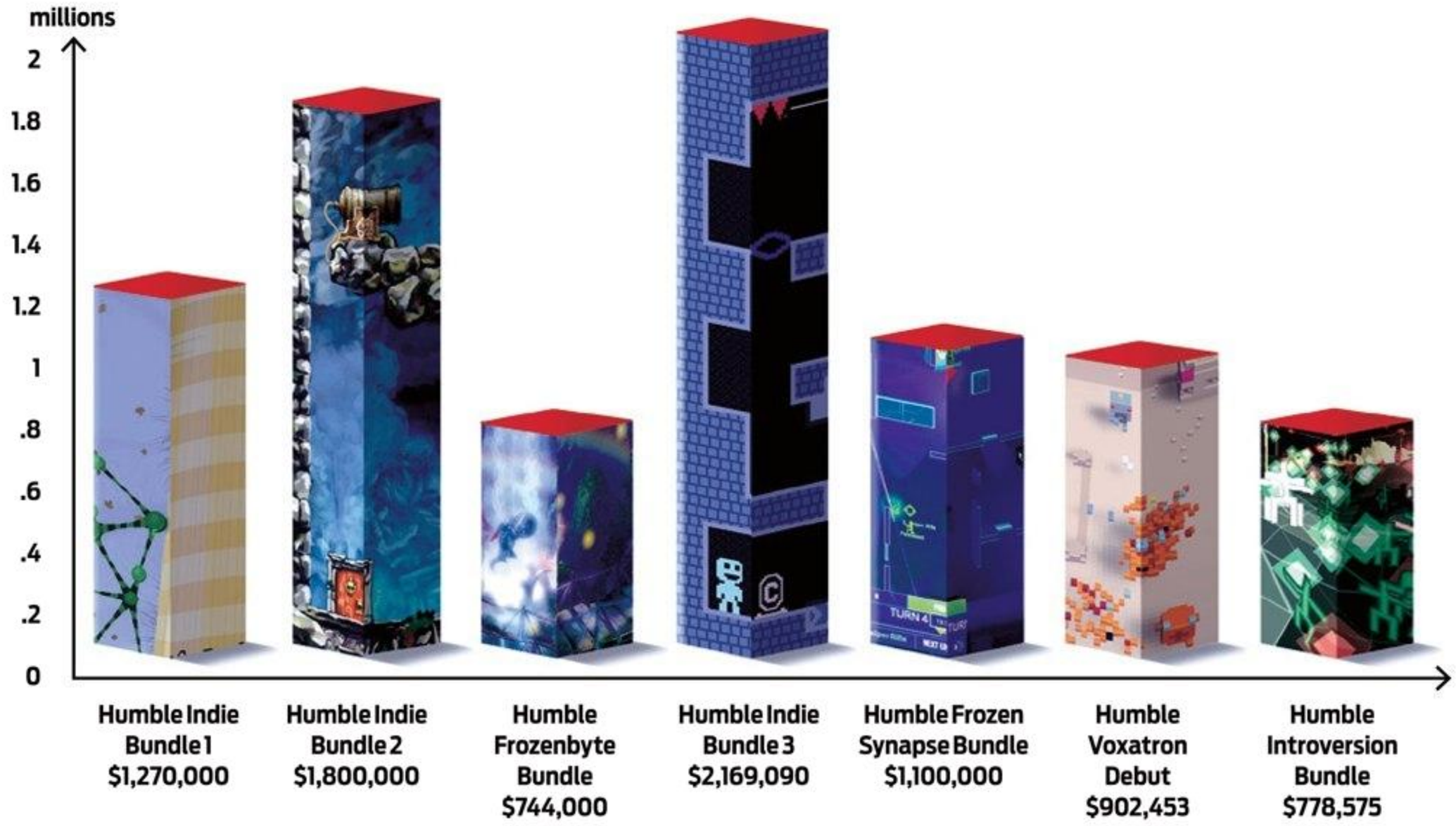
Elder Scrolls VI should be set in France during World War II.
@IanHardingham

TES VI will be set in Rapture.
@NemoNaemo

SPACE.
@jongreenall

To have your say, follow @pcgamer

NOT SO HUMBLE? A few hundred grand here, a few there—pretty soon you're talking real money



A Humble $9 Million

The Humble Indie Bundle is making indie games huge *by PC Gamer*

Five years ago, if you asked a successful indie developer if it would like to sell its entire back catalog for a minimum of one cent, its founders might have been offended. Now, it's one of the highest honors and most lucrative opportunities out there. The Humble Indie Bundle was started by a few talented but not hugely famous developers, Wolfire Games, in May 2010. They'd noticed that certain bundles of games sold well on Steam, and wanted to combine elements of those offers with other features they liked: cross-platform compatibility, no DRM, pay-what-you-want, and a custom charitable donation.

The result, seven bundles later: "We have raised about $9 million total," says one of the organizers, Richard Esguerra. "That's meant about $5 million raised for developers, more than $3 million for charity, and less than $1 million for Humble Bundle through the optional humble tip." The first bundle contained six games, including Wolfire's own rabbit fighting game *Lugaru* and perennial favorite *World of Goo*. Later bundles included *Braid*, *Trine*, *VVVVVV*, *Frozen Synapse* and *Darwinia*, the bundles taking an average of $1.2 million dollars each.

They claim the next bundle will "melt keyboards"

The organizers are making a good faith gesture toward gamers, trusting that there are enough people willing to give something back to outweigh those determined to pirate. The result of that faith is one of the fastest growing indie publishing schemes in history.

The trailer for each bundle explains what's interesting about the games in an accessible, funny way, and they're all cool ideas you haven't played before. When you buy, you decide not only how much to pay, but exactly who your money goes to—customizing the split between the developers, charities and organizers. Everything about the process is easy, quick and accessible.

Since the first two bundles, they've branched out into more than just repackaging existing games: earlier this year, the relatively unknown shooter *Voxatron* launched as a "Humble Debut" and sold 172,000 copies, with other games added as bonuses throughout the promotion. Most recently, Introversion made around $190,000 and doubled the audience for its games by releasing its entire back catalog as a Humble Bundle.

The Humble Bundle organizers have no plans to stop: they claim the next bundle will "melt keyboards worldwide." It's encouraging to see the organization serve as a sort of "lightweight publisher" for experimental games like *Voxatron*. They're already a huge force for good in PC gaming, and we'd be ecstatic to see them become a permanent fixture of it. ■

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THE SPY

The last time The Spy was in Ukraine, it was August 1991 and the country had just signed its Declaration of Independence. The Spy awoke surrounded by empty bottles of vodka with three Djungarian hamsters frozen to his face. The Spy doesn't like to talk about that time.

The Spy's last mission was to revisit Ukraine to see how it's doing, with the implicit instruction to avoid vodka and small Soviet rodents. Alas, The Spy awoke in his Kiev hotel room surrounded by bottles of vodka, but there were no hamsters to be seen.

> **Little is known about Stage 5, except that it's cloud-based.**

Ukraine isn't overflowing with PC game developers, but it is home to a special few. One of those developers is GSC Game World, creator of *Stalker* and its numerous expansions. The team announced in 2011 that it had started work on *Stalker 2*, but The Spy has subsequently heard that there's trouble afoot in the radioactive wastes of Chernobyl.

The Spy put on his spare pair of trousers, kicked away the piles of empty vodka bottles and headed into the freezing Kiev streets. Among the rabble of a public square, The Spy met his contact and learned the facts: *Stalker 2* was initially being developed exclusively for the PC, but GSC needed more money to complete the game. In an effort to attract more publishers, it began work on a console version, but to no avail.

With no publisher money, the team has closed shop. There's still hope—the dedication of GSC is well documented, and it has crawled through hard times to deliver a *Stalker* game in the past. But for now, The Spy's contact reminds him that the first *Stalker* would never have been released if not for publisher THQ boot-strapping the developers.

Saddened, The Spy hit the bottle pretty hard. If there's no room in this world for the uncompromising vision of Ukrainian depressives, then what's the point of going on? You may as well let the cold winter take you.

Only an old friend could cheer The Spy up at a time like this. Epic Games' Cliff "Cliffy 'Cliffy B' B" Bleszinski has always been around to offer a kind word when The Spy has needed it. Over the course of a long, rambling monolog Cliff did impart one piece of wisdom. "It'll all be better in a Fortnite," he said. "Fort*night*," The Spy corrected, slamming down the phone. Then it hit him: like The Spy, Cliffy has the ability to imply spelling and capitalization in speech, and those kind words were more than just a platitude. They were a new mission.

The Spy snatched up the receiver and hit redial. "What is Fortnite!?" he demanded. Cliff hung up.

Fortunately, by replaying Cliff's phone call and extracting the first and third letters from every ninth word, a message became clear: hunt down one of the frozen face-hamsters, now thawed and living in Paris.

At a small cafe on the Seine, the sophisticated furry handed The Spy a microfilm containing footage of Epic's latest game, revealing it to be a post-apocalyptic co-op construction romp involving barricades and monsters who are very disrespectful toward barricades.

There was something else, though: this game didn't yet exist. This was a trailer built to attract publisher interest. Even the biggest developers need a helping hand, sometimes.

The Spy thought he was just about done for the month, but a message from *Firefall* developers Red 5 meant he had to change flights and head to California. The message was brief: "URY ZHILINSKY HIRED TO WORK ON STAGE 5."

The Spy knows two people by the name Ury Zhilinsky. He's either the ex-KGB assassin who engaged The Spy in a deadly game of cat-and-mouse across central Europe in the 1980s, or one of the developers behind *Crysis 2*. Little is known about Stage 5, other than that it's a cloud-based project. If it's Ury the games developer, it's sure to look gorgeous. If it's Ury the assassin, expect a cold game about smoking, drinking and wearing mustard-colored slacks. Spy out. ■ ***The Spy***

The Spy calls it "wodka."

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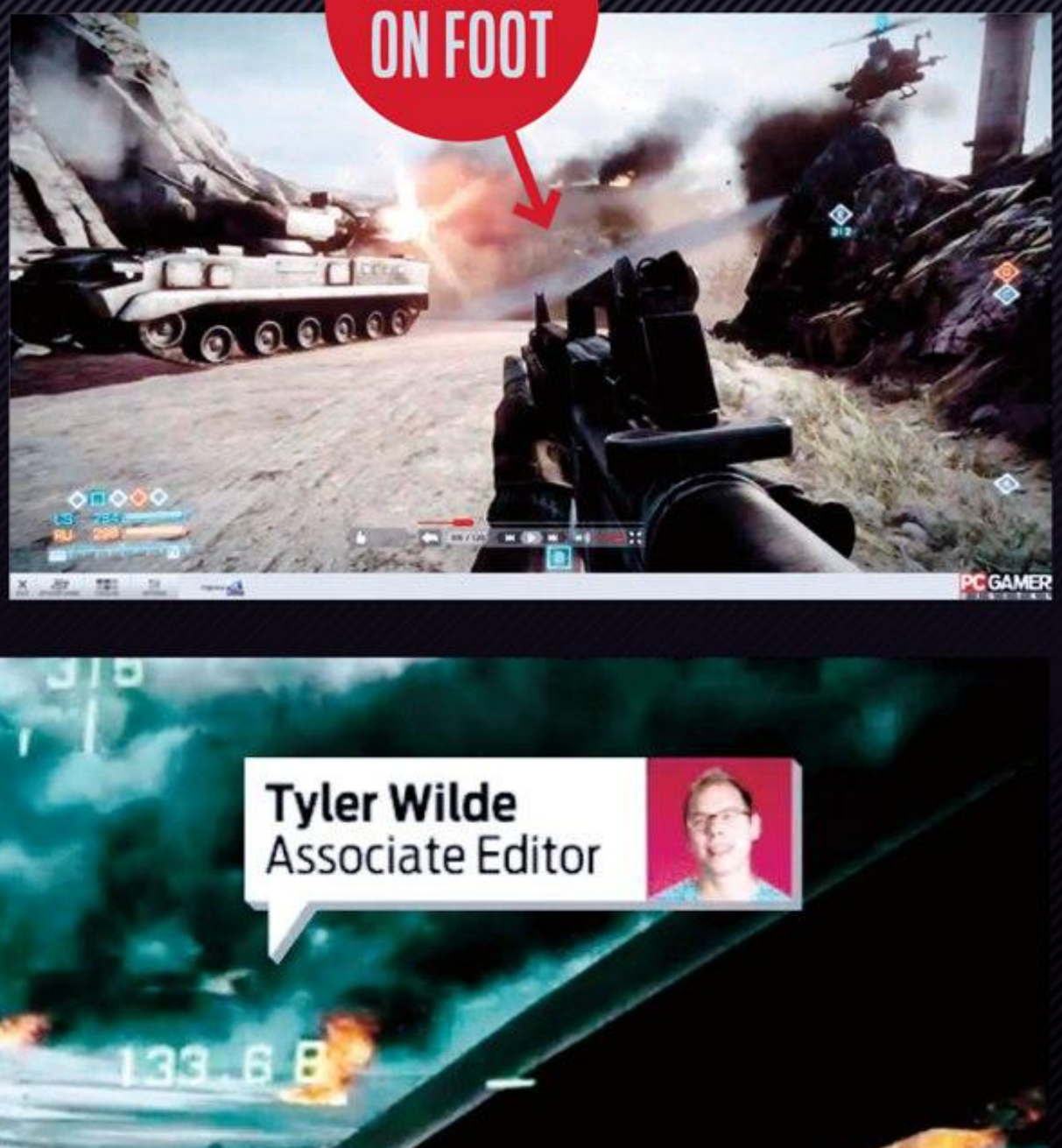

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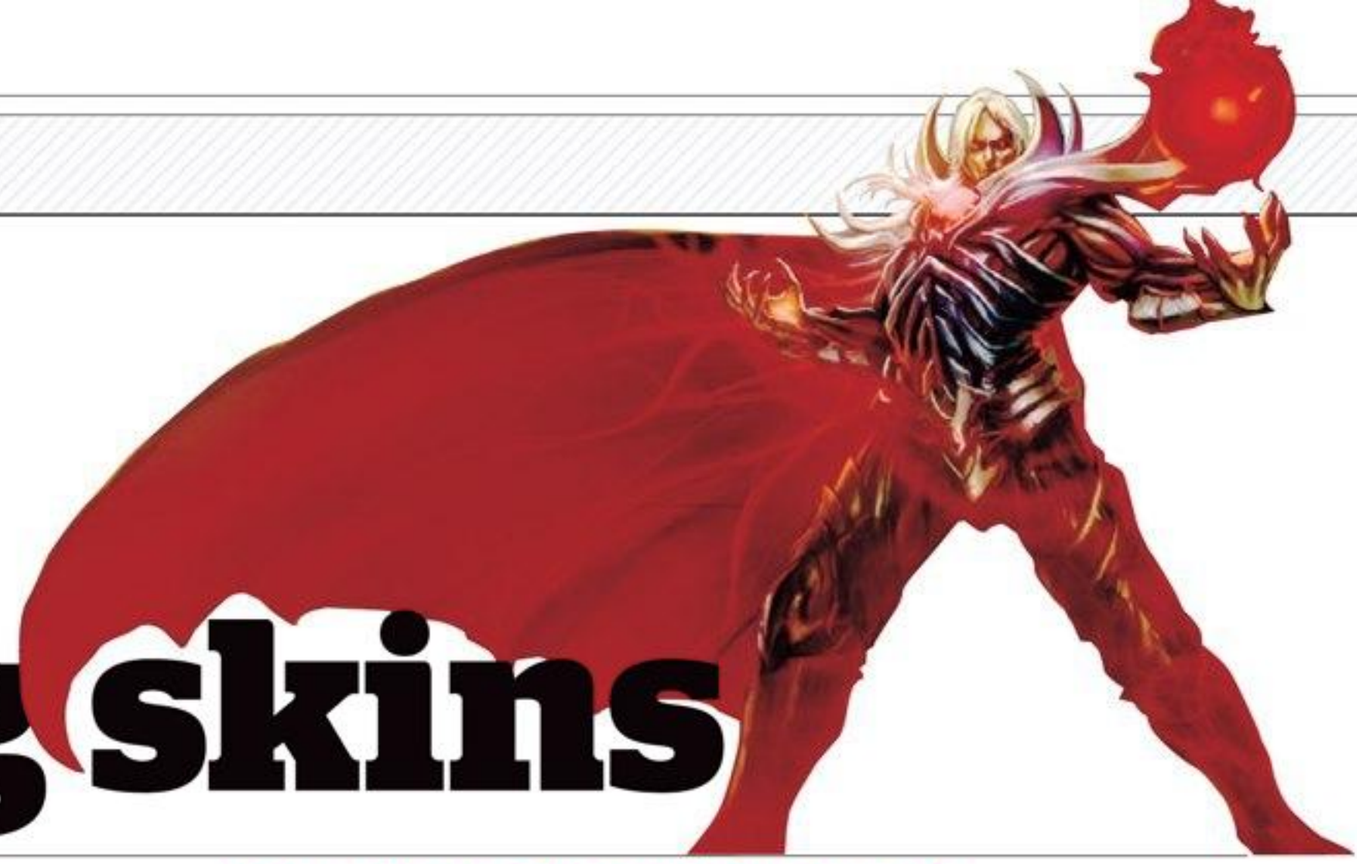
Massive Attack



Winning skins

Personalize your favorite champions in **LEAGUE OF LEGENDS** *by Phil Flick*

Legendary skins offer a great way to make your champion stand out in *League of Legends* while keeping the game free-to-play. But at 1820 Riot Points ($14), they can be a steep investment for little payoff. See which skins aren't worth your while, and which are truly worthy of the "Legendary" label.

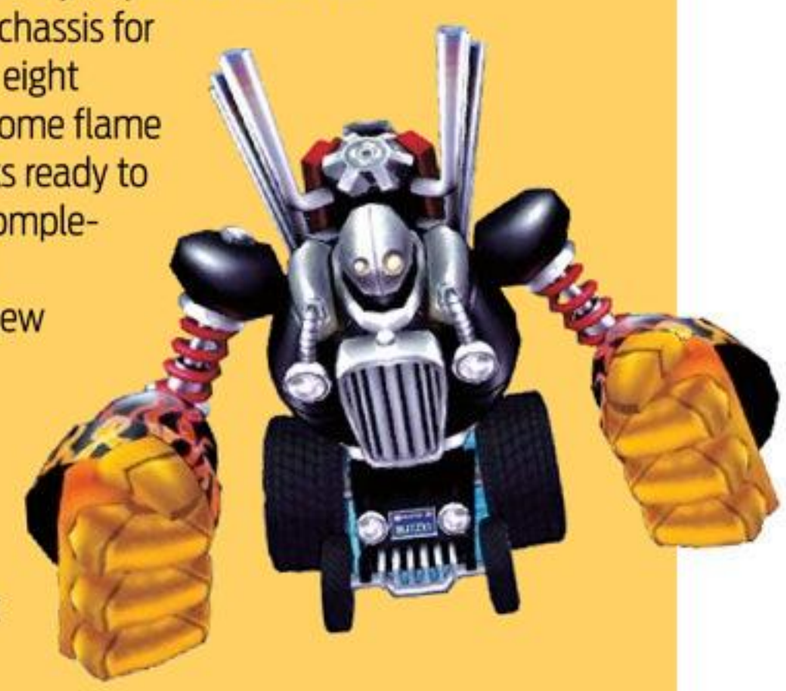
ALIEN INVADER HEIMERDINGER

Even Alf wouldn't deem this make-over out of this world. This average-terrestrial skin has a close encounter with greatness, but ultimately falls short on what could've been an incredible Legendary skin. Heimer morphs into an impressive looking alien with an enlarged, *Mars Attacks*-style cranium—but the lack of custom sounds or animations (aside from new laser-gun turrets) keep this skin grounded.

PILTOVER CUSTOMS BLITZCRANK

TRULY LEGENDARY

This pimped-out ride is just plain awesome. Ditching his usual chassis for some new wheels, an eight exhaust engine, and some flame decals, Bliztcrank looks ready to tear up the road. To complement the body mods, Blitzcrank's sporting new sounds on top of his regular voiceover, where he honks and peels out. If you love playing Blitzcrank, this skin will really get your engine going.



BROLAF

As Olaf himself would proclaim, this is one bro-tastic skin. With dual popped-collar polo shirts, a beer helmet, and a pair of axes crafted from Graggy Ice boxes, he's practically a clone of the campus douchebag. In the sound department, Brolaf provides plenty of entertaining one-liners that'll bring you back to your college days. If you play Olaf and proclaim yourself Broceiden, King of the Brocean, pick this bro-mazing skin up.

ASTRONAUT TEEMO

TRULY LEGENDARY

That's one small step for Summoners, one giant leap for Yordle-kind. Not only does Teemo get a special low-gravity walking animation, but all his voiceovers sound like Neal Armstrong broadcasting from the moon. To sweeten this galactic goodie, Teemo now fires lasers and drop satellites instead of mushrooms. This spaced-out skin is top-notch, and any serious Teemo player should consider buying it.

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ANNIE IN WONDERLAND

The Chesire Cat would not be amused—this whimsical look barely differs from the Prom Queen Annie skin, other than being twice the cost. If you're in search of spiffy new duds for the prodigal pyromancer, try Frostfire Annie instead—this rabbit hole will only leave you feeling duped.

BLOOD LORD VLADIMIR

Vlad's default look's been cranked up to 11, decking him out in a spiked mantle and cape in addition to some freaking excellent new spell particle effects. Top it off with a vilainous new voiceover, and you'll be sending that wimpy Edward Cullen fleeing for his life in no time.

FIREFIGHTER TRISTANA

Looking like a member of the Rescue Rangers, the adorable Megling Gunner takes up a giant water-blaster that sprays liquid-propelled cannonballs. Unfortunately, Trist doesn't get any new effects. Not hot enough to call the fire department or burn a hole in your wallet.

GENTLEMAN CHO'GATH

Perfect for those who love playing Cho' and want to look damn sharp doing so. This dapper monster spouts old-timey English sayings such as "Pip pip," and "Cheerio!" His exquisite new model sports a tuxedo, top hat, pipe, and monocle—befitting of those with refined tastes.

CORPORATE MUNDO

Every Mundo player ought to invest in this snappy skin. Its value lies in the slew of hilarious corporate-world lingo that Mundo spouts into his hokey '90s cell phone. To complete the yuppie transformation, Mundo now throws a briefcase and struts around in business professional attire.

LION DANCE KOG'MAW

Bring in the new year with this Chinese Dragon reskin. Sporting fantastic effects, Koggy swaps his slimy spell effects (save for Void Ooze) for dazzling fireworks that explode with a whistling pop. Nabbing kills with a sparkler instead of a booger is just so satisfying. Definitely worth the RP.

NUNU BOT

Nunu's circuitry wasn't upgraded with new attack or spell animations, but the robotic rework gives him a slick animatronic feel and a new /dance. It also comes with an upgraded voiceover akin to the goofy Angry Goran video (bit.ly/twHNmy). A high-quality skin, worthy of a spot in any Nunu fan's collection.

MAGNIFICENT TWISTED FATE

Lamer than the "coin behind the ear" trick. This disappointing reskin turns the card-tossing Twisted Fate into a full-on magician, but beyond the new hat and cape, there isn't much else to see. Definitely spend your RP elsewhere; there just isn't enough magic here to warrant a purchase.

RED BARON CORKI

Even though Corki's a high-flyer in-game, this bird is a total nose dive. The humdrum reskin turns his ordinary plane into the Red Baron's Fokker DR 1, painted a bright fire truck red with German crosses on the wings. Only recommended to World War I buffs or diehard Snoopy fans.

DEMONBLADE TRYNDAMERE

Trynd ditches his helmet and grabs an unusual sword that looks straight out of *Soul Calibur*, replete with orange tentacles. Besides his otherworldly weaponry, a new voice-over and special fury-gain particles complete this badass look. Highly recommended to any Tryndamere player.

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Steampunk stylin'

Our exclusive reveal of **DRAGON NEST**'s newest class: the adept and adorable Tinkerer *by Lucas Sullivan*

Wrenches: the next big thing in anime fashion.

"Time for a TUNE-UP!" was the last thing he ever heard.

I tend to gravitate toward the "jack-of-all-trades" role in MMOs, so I've always had a tough time sticking with a class in Nexon's free-to-play action-MMO *Dragon Nest*. The Warrior excels at close combat, the Archer peppers foes with ranged attacks, the Sorceress casts high-damage spells, and the Cleric excels at defending himself and others. That's all well and good—but what if I want to do a little bit of everything? That's no doubt what the developers had in mind when they came up with the Tinkerer: the cute-but-clumsy handywoman who can hold her own at close quarters, mid-range, and long distances alike. And when you've got brains like the Tinkerer, you don't need brawn—your gigantic handcannon and robotic minions'll do the job just fine.

The Tinkerer's origin story is what you would get if you turned *Terminator 2* into a children's book. Fifty years in the future, an ingenious scientist named Jasmine hatches a plan to prevent global destruction on the world of Altera: send a clone of herself back in time. Dozens of flawed copies fail to complete their missions, however, until the perfect clone is created: the Tinkerer, whom you must pilot through the past to restore prosperity to the land—mainly by laying the smackdown on baddies.

And trust me when I say that you'll have the all tools you could possibly need at your disposal, from robotic minions and rocket turrets to gravity grenades and handheld helicopters. The Tinkerer is most comfortable when fighting enemies at long range, using her imposing handcannon to bombard monsters from afar. Should her opponents close the gap, she's got plenty of keep-away options to choose from, including a push-back forcefield and an ensnaring bubble. Skilled players will make great use of her dodge ability, which morphs her cannon into a helicopter and whisks her out of harm's way. Should you prefer fight over flight, you can whip out her melee weapon: an enormous wrench which she daintily smashes into her target's face like a bat to an ugly baseball.

My favorite of the Tinkerer's attacks is also one of the silliest: keeping with her "oversized armaments" theme, she conjures an immense magnifying glass to burn her enemies like so many ants. If you'd rather sit back while your loyal constructs fight on your behalf, you can send an army of MechaDucks or your robotic butler Alfredo into the fray (see boxouts for their abilities). And when you're done toying with your enemies, wipe them out with an earth-charring biochemical missile and call it a day.

With so many mechanical tricks up her sleeve, the Tinkerer is the perfect fit for players (like me) who want a bevy of options for every scenario—or for anyone who has always wanted to hit things with a giant wrench. You can discover the joys of the Tinkerer's industrial ingenuity when she and her massive metal butler are released this spring. ■

Tools of the trade

MechaDuck
Shoots electricity
Mans the rocket turrets
Self-destructs when ordered

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They're like cute, about-to-be-obliterated snowglobes.

Time to put him out of his green, cycloptic misery.

Tools of the trade

Alfredo
Stomps on foes
Creates a fist-whirlwind
Can absorb damage for allies

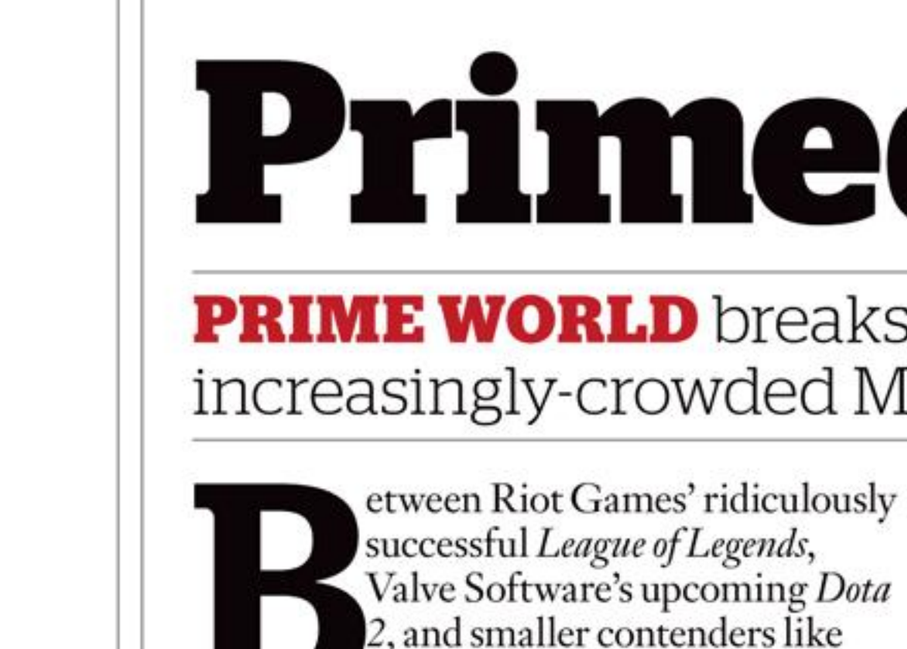
Keeping with her "oversized armaments" theme, she conjures an immense magnifying glass to burn her enemies like so many ants.

Unbeknownst to most historians, jetpacks were key to medieval warfare.

Primed for carnage

PRIME WORLD breaks new ground in the increasingly-crowded MOBA genre ***by Ryan Scott***

Between Riot Games' ridiculously successful *League of Legends*, Valve Software's upcoming *Dota 2*, and smaller contenders like *Heroes of Newerth* and *Rise of Immortals*, the MOBA model has quickly become a very popular (and very crowded) real-time strategy offshoot. Russian developer Nival's *Prime World* certainly follows the tried-and-true MOBA formula, but introduces a few unique mechanical twists to inject some freshness into the increasingly-congested subgenre.



Even in times of war, it helps to stop and smell the lily pads.

"Our goal is to create a game that rewards players for using social skills to compete as a team," says Divya Valluri, *Prime World*'s North American producer. "We're aiming to create a new genre: social strategy."

While the nitty-gritty details of the Facebook tie-in are still hazy (minigames that buff your hero, an emphasis on your real-life gender dictating your abilities), the overall game flow relies heavily on base management and terrain domination, which sound like a pretty radical departure from the typically-static MOBA map.

"The game really starts at your castle, which is a persistent structure that you build over time," Valluri explains. "The castle offers bonuses and rewards that you can use during battle. Think of it as more than just a hub to look at your achievements and house your heroes; [it] gives you the opportunity to attract new heroes, keep your existing heroes happy, and make them stronger. The castle management is a game all unto itself—and because it's powered by your social network, you'll be able to leverage your Facebook friends list to bolster your castle and prepare your heroes for war." It finally happened: *Defense of the Ancients* and *FarmVille*, together at last.

In contrast to the typical push-and-destroy flow of gameplay, dominating

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your opponents allows you to repurpose captured territory as your own. "Each team has its own native terrain, in addition to neutral terrain," Valluri says. "Players secure capture points, lower the opposition's flag, and raise their own to 'terraform' the map. Your hero will receive stat bonuses and buffs when they're on their native terrain, so it's valuable to conquer different spaces as you inch closer towards the enemy base." This intriguing mechanic sounds like a combination of *LoL*'s capture-point Dominion mode with the classic three-lane map, which could inspire some compelling new strategies and methods of attack via attrition.

Ever since development began in 2008, Nival's been hopeful that *Prime World* can be a contender for the MOBA crown. But with much of the target audience already glued to *League of Legends*, and *Dota 2* right around the corner, what makes *Prime World* an attractive alternative? Valluri's answer is threefold: competition, collaboration, and strategy, which he hopes the game will deliver "by the truckload."

You'll be able to leverage your Facebook friends list to bolster your forces and prepare for war.

The atypical mechanics could make or break *Prime World*'s shot at greatness. Will social shut-ins be unable to compete? Will befriending random strangers be an advantage? Nival might not have all their cards on the table just yet, but we're eager to see what comes of their social-network master plan. ■

Trying to storm my front gate? Nuh-uh, buddy. I don't think so.

Now I can cross "Be devoured by a pack of disgruntled tigers" off my bucket list.

MOBA HERO OF THE MONTH

THUNDER-BRINGER

CHARGED UP AND READY FOR SOME LETHAL ZAPPING WITH THIS SHOCKING SIMIAN

I'm defending my tower when a team-fight breaks out on the other side of the map. This *Heroes of Newerth* arena is too large to even try to join the fray—but I watch the clash carefully anyway. As soon as I see an injured enemy break off and run for safety, it's my Thunderbringer's turn to strike! Lightning flashes down from the sky, arcing to the heads of every enemy champion. The wounded one gets obliterated, and the rest of his team flees the fight. Easy money.

Thunderbringer is *HoN*'s omnipresent-deity hero—provided I can watch the mini-map as closely as I do the creeps and champions in my own lane. Even as I spam Chain Lightning to dispatch an incoming creep-wave, I always keep a finger hovered over my ultimate, Lightning Storm—watching and waiting to incur electric wrath upon my enemies. Scoring an instant kill with a single key-press gratifies my gamer-soul with a delight reserved solely for the gods.

To fully realize Thunderbringer's divine destiny, I prefer to purchase a Restoration Stone, which allows a periodic refresh of all my abilities. Suddenly, battles become filled with the fury of a massively vengeful thunderhead. Bolts and arcs of lighting flash in quick succession across my enemies' screens.

The toughest champions may not fear electrocution, but the squishier casters and DPSers may just soil themselves as they turn to run. They don't realize the futility of their flight until another rod of lightning toasts their now-lifeless corpse. Who says lightning never strikes the same place twice? ■ ***Andrew Beck***

He's the bug, I'm the zapper.

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DEV MAN TALKING

Swen Vincke is the head of Larian Studios. He still plays *Ultima VII*, adores Terry Pratchett and hates boring. His secret dream is to create an RPG that will dwarf them all. Recently, he developed an obsession for organometallic chemistry.

It's hard to find a gaming forum that doesn't contain a rant about the lack of innovation in gaming. These rants are usually aimed at the big publishers, which are rumored to have bouts of hypothermia whenever they're confronted with a new idea. The bad news is that these rants aren't completely off the mark. The good news is that you can help fix this.

In general, the majority of publishers *do* care about gaming. However, if you put all of the employees together in one big room and called it a "green-light meeting" where they needed to approve a really cool new concept, you'd have jinxed it: before you could say $, they'd all take the no-risk route and professionally shoot down whatever novel idea was presented to them.

Why would they do this? Simple—a collective fear of being responsible for anything that could in hindsight be called a failure. After all, innovation may be cool, but job security is even cooler. So they resort to things they know will work, which is more of the same, with bigger budgets (the *Call of Duty* series is a good example).

The route to better fun

It's a situation that's all too familiar to other creative industries. For decades, developers, often consumed by their own idealism and not knowing how to market their own games, allowed others to benefit from their work. This resulted in a creative industry where the majority of a game's decisions are made by non-creatives, and the introduction of new ideas is dependent on the public getting fed up with the old ideas, a short-sighted approach that leads to market self-destruction of the type we witnessed, for instance, with the RTS genre in the 1990s.

That's why the advent of digital distribution and the complementary rise of the indie scene hold such promise. Most developers only work on the clone of Game X because they lack the funding to finance their Own_Cool_Thing™. But give them access to the piles of cash generated annually by the gaming industry, and proof will be given that innovation not only generates more fun, but also more revenue.

To achieve such a reality, independent developers need to play catch up with the established publishers. Fueled by years of revenue earned on the backs of developers, seven and even eight-digit productions are now being made. This has created a pattern of expectation among players in terms of production quality. If independent developers truly want to take the pole position, they'll need to achieve the same level of production values, otherwise they'll be unable to reach the same audience-level AAA productions currently enjoy. Additionally, they need to find room for failure, or they won't be able to exercise their creativity fully.

> **"Devs must find a way to access revenue from their games."**

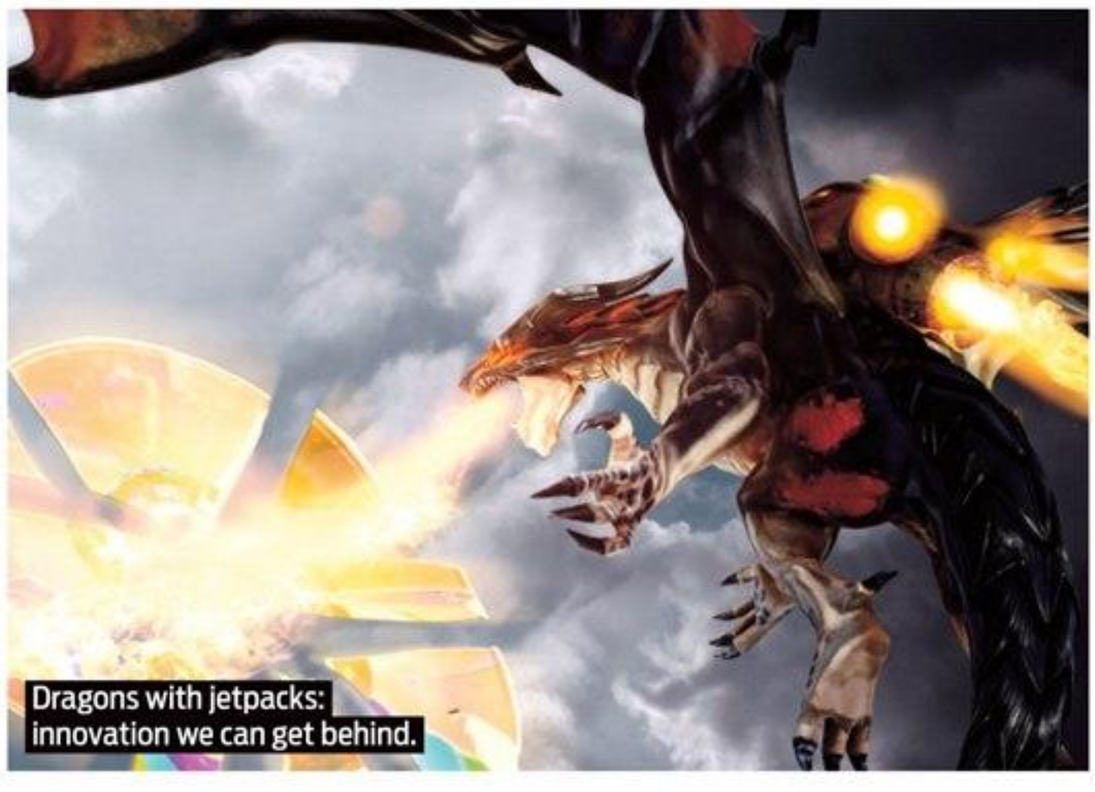
For that, it's imperative that developers find a way to access the revenue generated by their games without trading their rights away (which is what got them in the gutter in the first place).

A digital fix

Direct digital sales are the answer. To help appreciate this, here's a (simplified) example from the real world: a small console game with a development budget of $2 million sold 500,000 units. The total publisher profit was over $10 million, with the developer not getting a single penny due to some creative legalese. Since all the developer's money evaporated from making the game, he then started to work on another game, on the same terms with the same publisher.

Now imagine that this had been a PC game doing the same numbers digitally. Instead of getting nothing, this developer could've earned $10 million if all his sales went through digital platforms such as Steam and/or Impulse, and up to $20 million if all of his money was earned through his own digital store.

With this surplus of funds, he could then create the game of his dreams with AAA production values. Given the opportunity, you can bet that most developers would take the risk (that's how our mindset works). And this game might then become the next big thing—the game that would never get the green light at a major publisher; the game you already want to play without even knowing it yet. Therefore, to ensure the future of innovation, buying a game digitally is the best investment you can make. ■



Dragons with jetpacks: innovation we can get behind.

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Last year's best tactical wargames, *Achtung Panzer: Operation Star* and *Combat Mission: Battle for Normandy*, approach scenario design from completely opposite directions. *Operation Star* is open-ended and unscripted, which makes it unpredictable and perhaps endlessly replayable. *Combat Mission: BfN* features carefully constructed scenarios with set lists of units, fixed maps, and a fair bit of scripting. They're both good games and serious wargamers should own both of them. That said, I wish the *Operation Star*'s freedom didn't bring so much random stupidity along for the ride.

This isn't just a problem with *Operation Star*. It's a problem across strategy and wargaming, and it's one people like me probably helped create. I'll admit it: I was greedy.

> **Most strategy games still seem designed for my 15-year-old self.**

A single battle or campaign was never enough for me. I wanted to fight *my* wars and rule *my* kingdoms, not be confined by scenario parameters. I couldn't just enjoy a game like *Sid Meier's Gettysburg*, which gives each of the battle's crucial moments its own scenario. I was always thinking, "Wouldn't it be cool if these battles were part of a dynamic campaign where you fought the entire war?" I did not want to be tethered to the three days of Gettysburg, believing (wrongly) that the fun would end once I had completed the scenarios. I wanted my games to replenish themselves from a well of infinite possibilities.

To some extent, PC gaming finally succeeded in making all my wildest strategy dreams come true. In a lot of ways, the *Total War* series and Paradox's grand strategy games are exactly the games I was imagining back in the mid-1990's. Now I'm ready to appreciate smaller games that give me shorter, self-contained experiences. There's just one problem: most strategy games still seem to be designed for my 15-year-old self.

Operation Star, for example, sometimes creates these amazing "do or die" stories that I'll talking about for years. A beleaguered machine-gun platoon's last-ditch defense of a railroad station, or an infantry probe that escalates into a mini-Kursk, with tanks, artillery, and airstrikes getting pulled into the maelstrom. On the other hand, there are also a lot of battles that simply fizzle: an hour of two of infantry units chasing each other through a forest, with scarcely any contact. Or a thrilling tank assault that unravels because the AI abruptly parks its tanks in a kill-zone, letting them die pointlessly while it tries to figure out what to do.

Looking for a fight

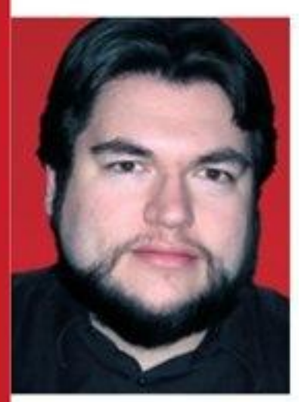
Battle for Normandy's AI may not be any smarter, but scenario design allows it to *appear* smarter, which is all I really ask. I don't care if an unexpected flank assault was the AI's or the scenario designer's idea, I'm just thrilled to have a real fight on my hands. It does lack some of *Operation Star*'s weightiness, knowing that my entire campaign is on the line, but that's a fair price to pay for a memorable battle and a tactical problem worth revisiting again and again.

Playing *Sword of the Stars II*, I sometimes thought that it was actually two games that ruined each other. One was a spaceship wargame with the potential to fill the void left by the *Homeworld* series. The other was a bad 4X-strategy game, broken and buggy, awkwardly wrapped around the wargame. What if they'd been separated, and *Sword of the Stars II* made into a game about commanding star fleets in battle, rather than managing boring space empires in the hope of getting both another patch and a decent fight?

I don't want open-ended strategy games to go away, but I would like to see more off them emphasize great scenarios rather than scope and variety. Games like *Sid Meier's Gettysburg* and *Homeworld* may have limited our choices and possibilities, but they also minimized the chances of boredom or disappointment. More current games should look to their example, instead of trying to recreate the magic of games like *Total War* and *Europa Universalis*. ■

This tank won a battle by itself (because the AI got lost and parked nearby).

TACTICAL ADVANTAGE



Rob Zacny hosts the Three Moves Ahead strategy podcast. He's recently been disliking *Sword of the Stars II* and *Stronghold 3*. *Skyrim* is cool, however. Email him at tacticaladvantage@pcgamer.com.

IN SIMULATION

It's been almost three years since I last took wing with A2A Simulations' *Wings of Silver* Boeing 377 Stratocruiser add-on for *Flight Simulator X* ("Flying Old Crankypants," December 2008), but some recent tweaks and upgrades compelled me to book another flight with the ol' bird.

The original *Wings of Silver* add-on featured a painstakingly modeled four-prop, double-deck Boeing Stratocruiser in all its post-WWII glory. Retailing for a healthy $37 (or $62 when paired with the $25 *Accu-Sim* expansion pack), A2A clearly didn't build the product for casual fliers. The finicky aircraft demands constant adjustments and OCD-level monitoring to keep its 3,500 horsepower Pratt & Whitney R4360 engines from overheating, melting down, and dropping you from the sky like a stone. Your flight crew (co-pilot, flight engineer, and navigator) would report on any significant problems but—annoying gum-flapping aside—offered no tangible assistance in solving the errors.

Money well spent

That's where A2A's latest *Captain of the Ship* expansion comes in. Although you'll have to drop an additional $30 to download it (www.a2asimulations.com), the money's well spent because that moronic flight engineer will now properly work his station and let you get on with the business of flying the plane. A2A put six months of AI coding into this feature so you can enjoy a true left-seat piloting experience (if switch flipping and constant systems monitoring isn't your thing). Handing over the flight engineer duties to the AI takes only a few mouse clicks.

Other new features include real-time passenger loading and unloading, a virtual flight attendant (Heidi) who ensures the passengers are belted in, fed, and properly lubricated during the flight, as well as a functioning navigator's station with real-time monitoring and wind and flight condition calculations. A natural speech system (that includes British and American accents) adds to the immersion.

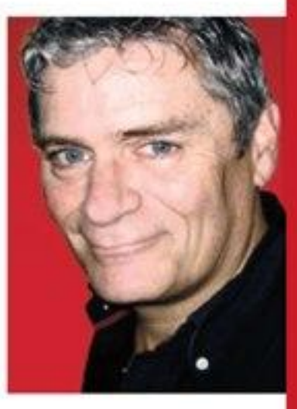
Even with the reduced workload, this aircraft is a pain to fly. Mess up the flap schedule on take-off and you'll likely break something, stall, and crash. Over-rev the engines during the climb-out and you'll probably set the damned things aflame and crash. Even with a functional flight engineer taking care of the minutiae, the Boeing 377 is too unpredictable to take for granted. You don't so much fly it as *massage* it into the air, and that usually takes every ounce of concentration you possess.

> **"You don't so much fly it as *massage* it into the air."**

However, there's a significant payoff for getting it right this time. *Captain of the Ship*'s new career mode tracks your fuel consumption, air mileage, cost per mile, as well as the overall quality of your flights. If you fly through a lot of turbulence and spill too many drinks, you'll also see passenger comments and complaints on your post-flight summary sheet. Pull off an unexpected dive or similar stomach-twisting maneuver and you can even make them scream in terror (I turned that one into a minigame for a while).

Realism fanatics will love the addition of many intricate details, including cylinder head and carburetor air temperature fluctuations (manageable with cowl and intercooler flaps), fouled spark plugs at low idling speeds, and sputtering, coughing engines at startup. There are even range marks on the indicators. New environmental sounds like squealing brakes, creaking bulkheads, and cabin chatter add further immersive depth.

The biggest selling point here, however, is that *you're* in charge of the aircraft, the crew, and the flight with no constraints or restrictions on how and where you fly. Along with that freedom, *Captain of the Ship* delivers a heady mix of aviation challenge, authenticity, and nostalgia for PC pilots of all backgrounds. ■



Andy Mahood carved his own path this month with *Flight Simulator X* (*Captain of the Ship* expansion), *C.A.R.S.* (open beta), *iRacing*, *Rise of Flight*, and *DCS: A-10C Warthog*. Contact him at insimulation@pcgamer.com.

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Everyone should have the freedom to be a loser, and the best RPGs allow you to roleplay misfits. Misfit characters are individuals who are inclined to pursue careers for which they aren't particularly well suited, or who focus on abilities that aren't necessarily practical, or who you cripple in some way by giving them disadvantages such as personality quirks. They're deliberately weakened or flawed characters, and they consistently produce great roleplaying experiences, giving the player an extra layer of depth.

Misfit characters inject drama and challenge into otherwise mundane situations. A Hobbit who insists upon becoming a platemail-encumbered fighter requires you to make some other compromises to ensure the little guy succeeds. A noble Asari who refuses to work with filthy Batarians under any circumstances may require you to find an alternate solution to a task, or to mix-up your preferred team lineup in order to leave the Asari out of the fray. A kleptomaniac Dwarf may crater your relationship with a faction that you were courting. Misfit characters make RPGs harder, but they ultimately make success more rewarding because you've invested personality into them and solved additional problems.

> **Misfits inject drama and challenge into mundane situations.**

Yet too many RPGs are obsessed with ensuring that any possible character is only as powerful, or as weak, as any other character. Whenever a game like *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* comes along and offers players incredible freedom to design, develop and equip their characters, and establishes a truly open world to explore, inevitably some cranks complain about imbalance, as if that's a flaw instead of a strength. The only balance an RPG needs is the assurance that any of the primary character archetypes can complete the game's main objectives, and *Skyrim* certainly does an excellent job of ensuring that mages, fighters and thieves are all capable adventurers. But they don't need to be equally capable of solving every task, or resolving any situation.

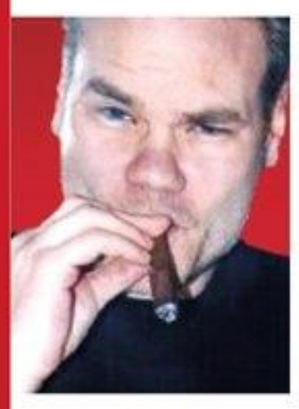
RPGs are supposed to offer choices and consequences, but too often those options are largely illusory and produce similar results. *Skyrim* actually improves on prior *Elder Scrolls* games by requiring you to make more meaningful character development decisions. RPGs like *Fallout* and *Planescape Torment* go further in requiring players to live with the consequences of their selections. If you create a character with minimal intelligence in *Fallout*, you won't even be able to coherently converse with NPCs. A brute relegated to mumbling unintelligibly may be an extremely difficult misfit character to play, but one of the reasons *Fallout* is such a legendary RPG is because it offered that roleplaying freedom.

Of course, if you're going to offer a great deal of freedom, it's inevitable for characters to become overpowered too. Just allowing players to be sidetracked by additional content instead of imposing a linear path means some players will develop more experienced, better equipped characters than other players, based upon the quantity of content they elect to explore. A *Skyrim* character who maxes out many skills, spends time enchanting equipment to its fullest potential and is stocked with a plethora of potions to imbibe, is going to be less challenging to play than less developed and equipped characters. The *Elder Scrolls* games have always had that dynamic, and it's possible to increase your stealth in *Skyrim* to become almost undetectable, or stack ability or attribute modifiers to become virtually invincible. Yet players who most loudly belch that an RPG is broken invariably fail to mention that acquiring a character with game-breaking power was a deliberate, unnecessary choice and it likely took over 100+ hours of focused effort.

Unanticipated exploits should be addressed where possible (a character bashing a dead body to gain skill points, for example), but most imbalances that emerge in a game like *Skyrim* are the result of the freedom that all great RPGs offer. ■

Skyrim gives you the freedom to make bad decisions.

ALTERNATE LIVES



Desslock has a misfit mage still lost in *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, and is lamenting the balanced gameplay in *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, because fools like Lando shouldn't be competitive with Jedi. Email him at alternatelives@pcgamer.com.

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TOTAL WAR: SHOGUN 2
FALL OF THE SAMURAI

FIRST LOOK An age of murderous modernity

Suddenly, I'm observing an increasingly chaotic battlefield from a spot just above and behind a single wheeled machinegun. Slap-bang in the center of the screen is a crosshair. Left mouse button depressed, I drag this reticle along a line of charging spearmen. Targets are knocked off their feet, flicked like puppets into unnatural poses, sent twirling to the turf.

When the smoke clears, an entire enemy unit has been blown away.

Directly controllable artillery isn't *Fall of the Samurai*'s most significant feature, but it's probably its most irresistible and surprising. Nailing far-off commanders is deliberately difficult though. The camera accompanies larger projectiles, but there's no sniper-style zoom view. While there'll be occasions in *FotS* when you get to mow down rows of samurai with machine guns, Creative Assembly is too serious about their history for it to be a regular occurrence. Despite the cinematic *Last Samurai* overtones, the game's primary focus is the Boshin War (1868-1869) rather than the ill-fated Satsuma Rebellion (1877) that inspired much of the 2003 Tom Cruise movie. Both sides in this low-key civil war were enthusiastic modernizers, eager to lay their hands on the latest Western military tech and strategy.

In another tweak, clicking the "end turn" button now advances your campaign a mere two weeks. With winters now lasting six turns, ponderous or ill-timed invasions will be costlier than ever.

Naval blazing

Longer cold snaps aren't the only new feature the humble *Total War* grunt has to worry about. Now the poor fools who do all the heavy trigger-pulling and sword-slashing can be slain *between battles* by naval bombardment. Select a friendly fleet on the campaign map and a range circle appears. Any army within this zone-o'-death may be pummeled without risk. You won't devastate targets, but hounding an invasion force as it trudges down a long coastal road could become the difference between victory and defeat in a later battle.

Mark this moment. In *Fall of the Samurai*, *Total War* navies finally go from being mere amusing distractions to indispensable strategic tools. That bombardment ability can also be used to clobber cities, neutralize coastal batteries (a new buildable structure) and turn the tide in normal ground battles.

READ ME

PUBLISHER
Sega

DEVELOPER
The Creative Assembly

LINK
totalwar.com/shogun2

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There's a bit of Arab in the horse model. And a bit of pantomime.

"Uh-oh, that flag's on fire."

The death of chivalry.

Secret servants

Unsurprisingly, given the 300-year period shift, most of the cast of spies and rabble-rousers don't come direct from *Shogun 2*. Working alongside familiar Shinobi (ninjas) and Geisha are two faction-specific secret policemen—the Ishen-Shishi (Imperialist) and Shinsengumi (Shogunate)—and the massively useful Foreign Veteran. Remember the nasty Colonel Bagley in *The Last Samurai*? That's the kind of calculating, conscience-free merc you get when you employ a foreign veteran. With only a day to play the surprisingly polished alpha build, I didn't have time to hoof through the full quarter-century long campaign, but I did—via an existing save file—get a tantalizing sneak peek at late-game politics and army compositions. Rather than gleefully dissolving all your carefully cultivated alliances and forcing you into a grueling multi-front struggle for survival,

CONFLICT COMPASS Which area of the globe will *Total War* trash next?

1 BRITAIN
Chance: *Tiny*
Because Blighty has figured in a good-few *TW* campaign maps, and Creative Assembly likes its conflicts clogged with distinctive factions, the UK Civil War installment is highly unlikely.

2 THE MEDITERRANEAN
Chance: *Moderate*
It's only a matter of time before the team returns to the setting of their 2004 smash. A modernized *Rome: Total War* would sell like giant foam thumbs at a coliseum matinee.

3 THE MIDDLE-EAST
Chance: *Slim*
Egypt, Iraq, Persia...wherever you look in the sandy junction between Africa and Asia, there's combat-rich ancient history waiting to be digitally disinterred. *TW* needs more chariots.

4 CHINA AND KOREA
Chance: *High*
Extending the *Shogun 2* map north or westward would open up all kinds of intriguing unit possibilities. A little further to the left, the incredible story of the Khmer Empire remains untold.

5 MIDDLE-EARTH
Chance: *Almost none*
Whenever we visit Creative Assembly, we leave little *LotR* hints. This time it was a basket of lembas bread and a pewter Balrog. Last time it was a Tom Bombadil songbook and a severed orc head.

This hardly seems the time for a fireworks display.

Realm Divide in *Fall of the Samurai* involves making a difficult choice. If you fancy it, you can leave the Shogunate and Imperialist factions to fight amongst themselves and go it alone as an independent republic. Alternatively you can accept the responsibilities and regalia of Shogunate or Imperial "Vanguard" (the choice will depend on your current allegiance).

By the time of Realm Divide, your troops will be doing most of their slaying with Western-designed rifles and artillery pieces, rather than cold steel and arrows.

Shipping forecast

Improvements in naval leadership sound even more substantial. Lead Campaign Designer Janos Gaspar described how computer-controlled admirals now have a much more sophisticated understanding of geography and, thanks to a new taskforce system, are much better at setting up fleets and dealing with several tasks simultaneously. Expect to see enemy ships sagely switching from blockades to bombardments, and dashing off to help with troop transportation when the need arises.

Ponderous or ill-timed invasions will be costlier than ever.

Away from battlefields and brine, Creative Assembly has actually been lobotomizing their AI. Apparently, in the current build, silicon powers are far too efficient at managing their economies and will routinely outproduce most players by 30 to 35 percent.

In the unlikely event *Fall of the Samurai*'s reworked AI fails to stretch you, then a couple of series additions will allow for some self-imposed challenge stiffening. Winning every engagement with a mix of inspired tactics and encyclopedic knowledge of unit stats? Try Battle Realism Mode's restricted camera, absent minimap, and limited enemy intel. Alternatively, make life hard for yourself by handing over a few units to the AI. Not only is it now possible to participate in 40 vs. 40 unit scraps thanks to an altered approach to reinforcements, but packets of troops can be passed to the AI together with simple "attack" or "defend" instructions. Is this the

BISH BOSH BOSHIN Boshin War basics

1854: After 200 years of isolation, Japan is bullied into accepting international trade, which opens the door to modernization.

1863: The Emperor sides with the growing anti-foreigner movement, a move that puts him at odds with the progressive Shogun.

1864: Xenophobic attacks prompt retaliatory bombardments by foreign powers. An Imperial rebellion against the Shogun fails.

1865: The Imperialists update their armies with British and American help. The Shogun looks to the French for training and supplies.

1866: Attempting to crush a second uprising, Shogunate armies are defeated by a Choshu force secretly allied with nearby Satsuma.

1867: A weakened Shogun resigns his powers to the Emperor, but the Shogun's family (the Tokugawa) retains political influence.

1868: Tension between the Imperialists and the Tokugawa erupts into conflict after the Imperialists attempt to consolidate their power.

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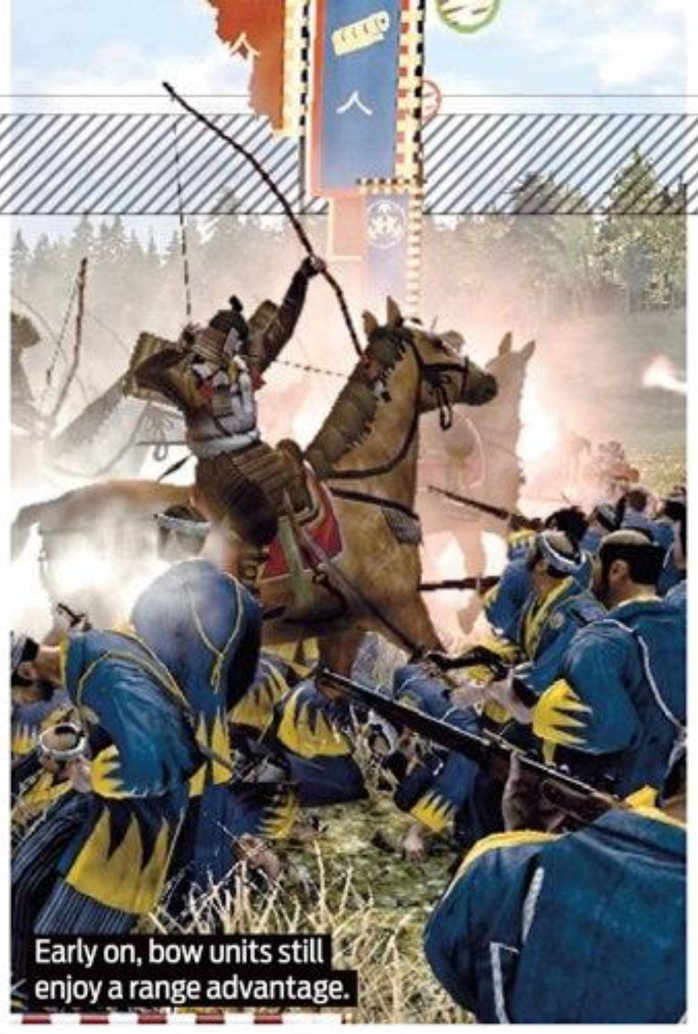
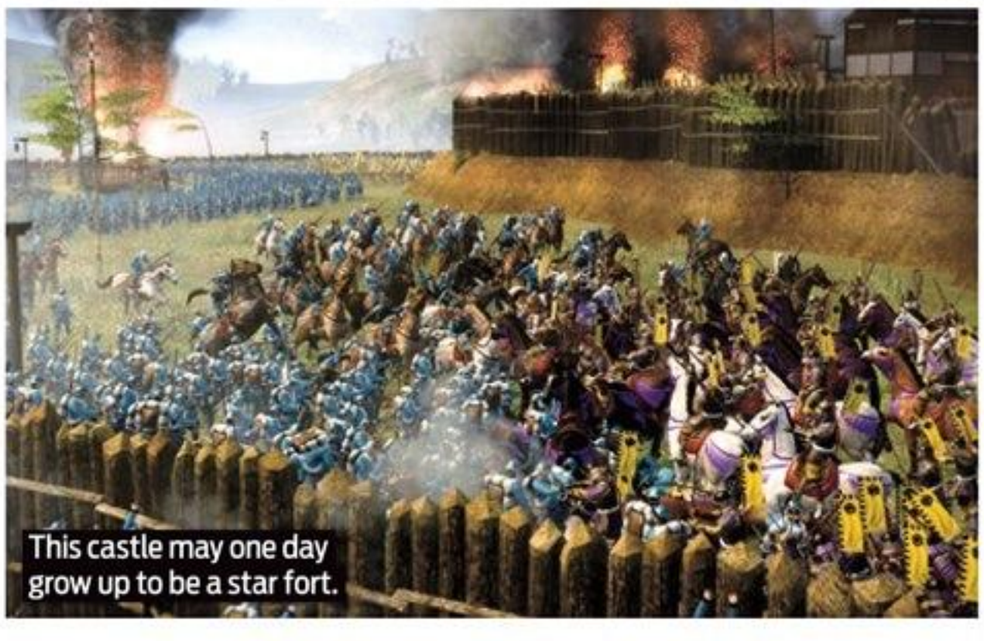


Early on, bow units still enjoy a range advantage.

Say the word and this death-spitter is yours to aim and fire.



This castle may one day grow up to be a star fort.

first step on the road to multi-tier *Take Command*-style armies and plausible battlefield subordinates? Probably not, but it's an intriguing development.

Oh, and if you want to know why *Fall of the Samurai* looks, feels and plays the way it does, a good place to start is the book list on www.stephenturnbull.com. An evening with Japanese film *When The Last Sword Is Drawn* should also prove illuminating.

Stabbing westward

While the game's relationship to *The Last Samurai* isn't nearly as close as it might first appear, the devs have still taken inspiration over its action sequences. Satsuma Rebellion-style revolts will happen now and again, meaning players will find themselves leading expeditions into the back-country to suppress armies of disgruntled nobles. The samurai sprinting stirringly through storms of machinegun and rifle fire are far more likely to be foes than friends.

As your lands lurch into modernity, so too will the interface, the campaign map and the background music. The sounds of traditional Japan will slowly and subtly give ground to Western instruments and motifs. Screen furniture will assume a more mechanized look. A completely reorganized campaign map, graced by new loftier peaks, will acquire smokestacks and smoggy blemishes. *Total War* is knocking on the door of the 20th century, and that door is soot-caked and strange.

As historical themes go, it's hard to think of one fresher or more alluring than Boshin War-era Japan. Cynics may point out that the real conflict "only" claimed the lives of 4,000 people, and that it featured more nervous scuffles than full-scale pitched battles, but this would be a tad unfair to the game. As Lead Battle Designer Jamie Ferguson observes: "With all *Total War* games we start with a factual startpoint then allow for counter-factual history to take place...There's nothing to say that, if either side had decided to get really serious, it couldn't have ended up in a conflict far more bloody than the American Civil War."

A conflict far more bloody than the American Civil War? With *Total War*'s unit counts that could be a tall order, but then again, with Gatling guns, naval barrages and repeating rifles in our armories for the first time, anything's possible. ■ ***Tim Stone***

1868:
The Imperialists' small yet modernized army come out on top in early battles. The Shogun retreats after allied defections.

1868:
Despite naval victories, the Shogun's troops are pushed north and eastward. Most surrender after the fall of Edo (Tokyo) in June.

1868:
A stubborn Northern Alliance led by the Aizu clan holds out until November. Navy remnants flee to Hokkaido and set up a republic.

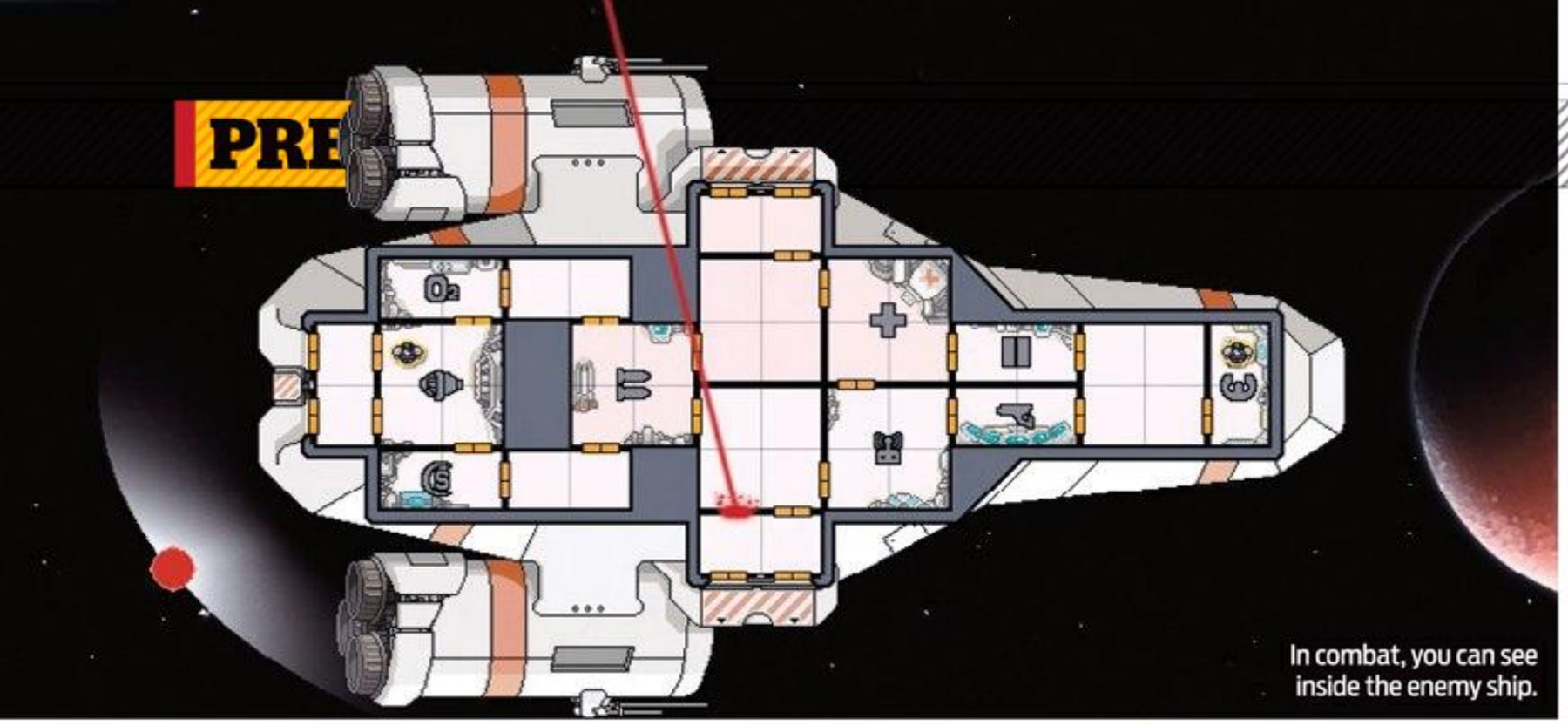
1869:
A daring rebel attempt to capture the pride of the Imperial fleet—the ironclad *Kotetsu*—is foiled by bad luck and a Gatling gun.

1869:
After the neutralizing of shore defences and the rebel navy, 7,000 Imperial troops land on Hokkaido. French advisors skedaddle.

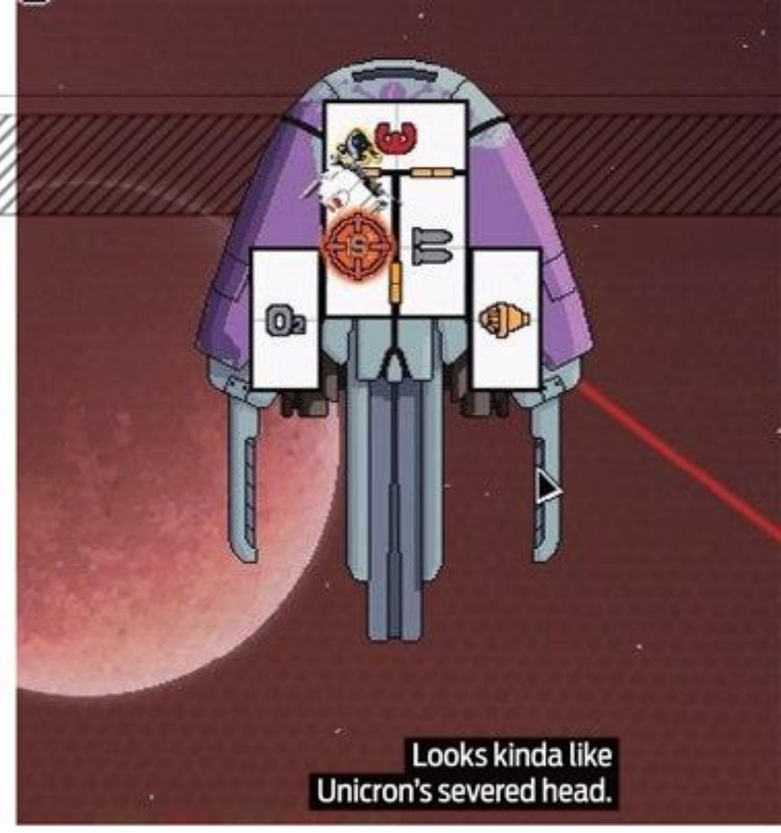
1869:
The republic falls ushering in a new Imperial era in which the country is unified; the samurai class is systematically dismantled.

1877:
Disgruntled Satsuma samurai rise against the new regime. Despite Tom Cruise's assistance, the rebellion ends.

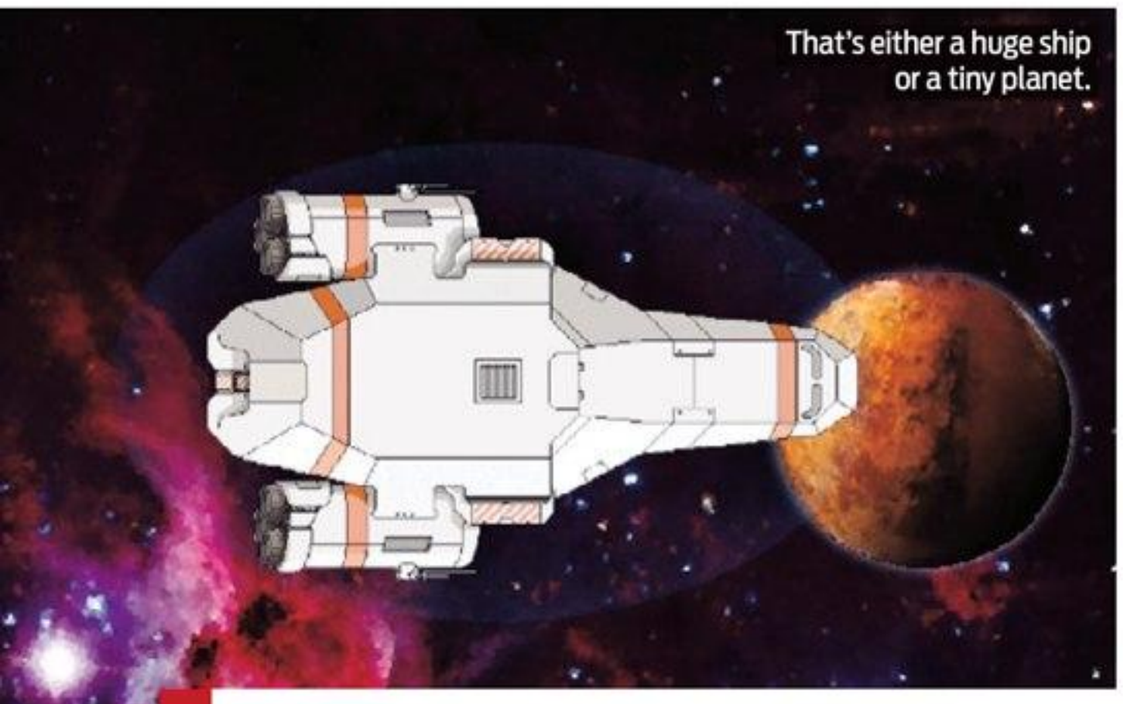
Release MARCH 2012



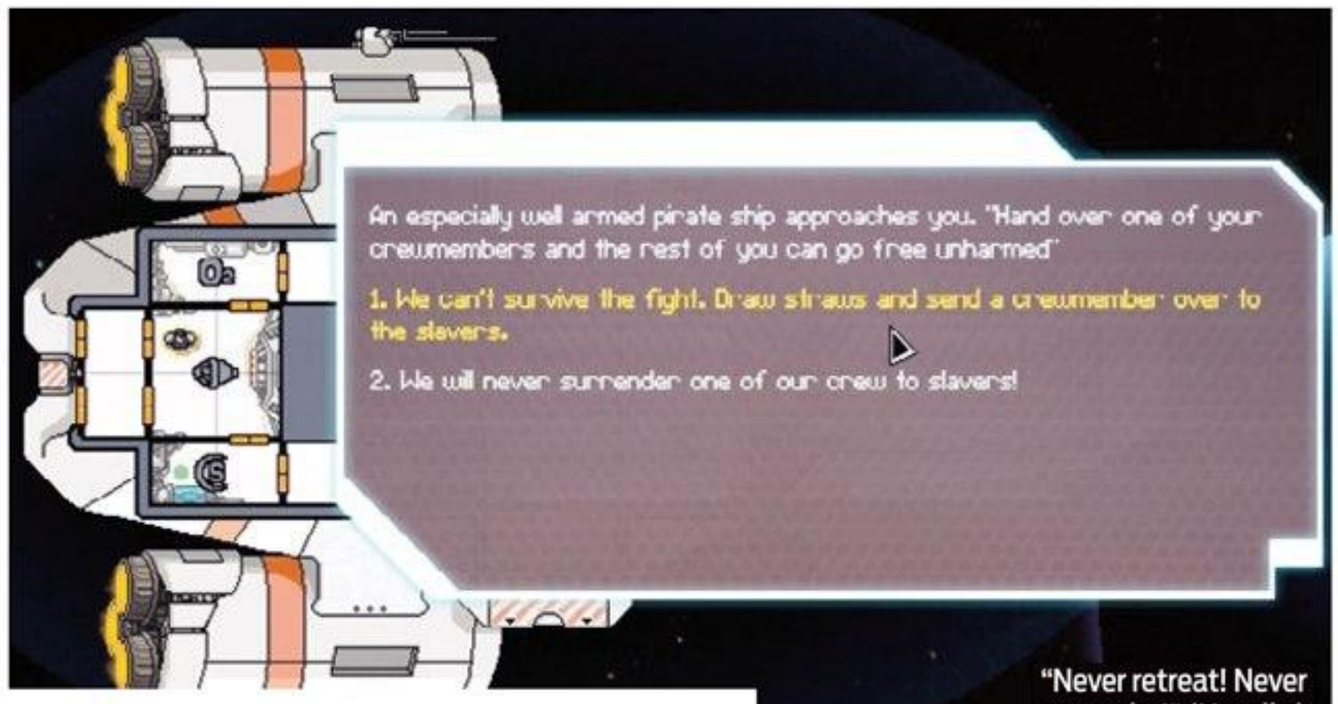
In combat, you can see inside the enemy ship.



Looks kinda like Unicron's severed head.



That's either a huge ship or a tiny planet.



"Never retreat! Never surrender!" (Usually.)

FASTER THAN LIGHT

PLAYED IT Guide the tiny crew of a fragile ship across a random universe

Slave traders! And they're jerks! They demand I hand over one of my crew, and I'm not nearly well equipped enough to take them in a fight. I have no choice. We draw straws, and Jack goes. *Sniff.* Jaaack!

Faster Than Light is a randomized space adventure in which you manage a ship and her crew, jumping from star to star. Your first encounter could be a free weapon, or a bunch of slave-trading lamewads. And losing a crew member *is* a big deal: your main interaction is ordering them around your ship, telling them to repair damaged systems, pilot, or heal up in the sickbay.

I have just two left. I put Emily at the helm, and Alison in the engine room ready to repair it if we take damage. We jump, and run into a small scout ship. It's an easy fight, and we get a good amount of scrap from the wreck. In the next system though, there's an asteroid field and a pirate vessel.

I target their shield generator with all my lasers and missiles, while chunks of rock batter my own. As their shields go offline, it's fun to watch them scramble around inside their ship trying to fix the generator while other systems catch fire. When they finally explode, the scrap from their vessel is substantial.

My ship is a mess. The fire in my engine room would kill my crew if I send them to put it out.

You can use scrap to upgrade, so I make a major investment to double my shields. And in the next system, I find a spare combat drone. It turns out to be a lethal combination: in every fight thereafter, my drone zaps away their shields in time for my main lasers to take out their generator.

I run into another slaver ship. Hand over a crew member? How about *you* hand over...your...hull integrity! Shoot them before they overanalyze my smacktalk!

We're both double-shielded, I have a combat drone and they have a defense drone. It's close. I use my lasers to take out their drone control system, and that lets my missiles get through to their shield generator. But by the time I take out their weapons systems, my engine is on fire. Luckily, they surrender, and offer me a slave to leave them alone.

Hah! No way, jerks! I destroy them. But my ship is a mess. The fire in my engine room would kill my crew if I sent them to put it out, so I open the exterior doors and vent the oxygen into space. That puts out the fire, but not before it spreads to the, er, oxygen room.

Alison has to run through the airless engine room to save the life support system. She does it, but suffocates before I can bring the repaired system back online. Emily is left to pilot the ship alone.

This game is brilliant, and brutal, and different every time.

It suddenly occurs to me that the slaver ship I just destroyed might have been the same one that took Jack. In fact, the slave they offered me might have *been* Jack. And I destroyed him. Jaaack! ■

Tom Francis

READ ME

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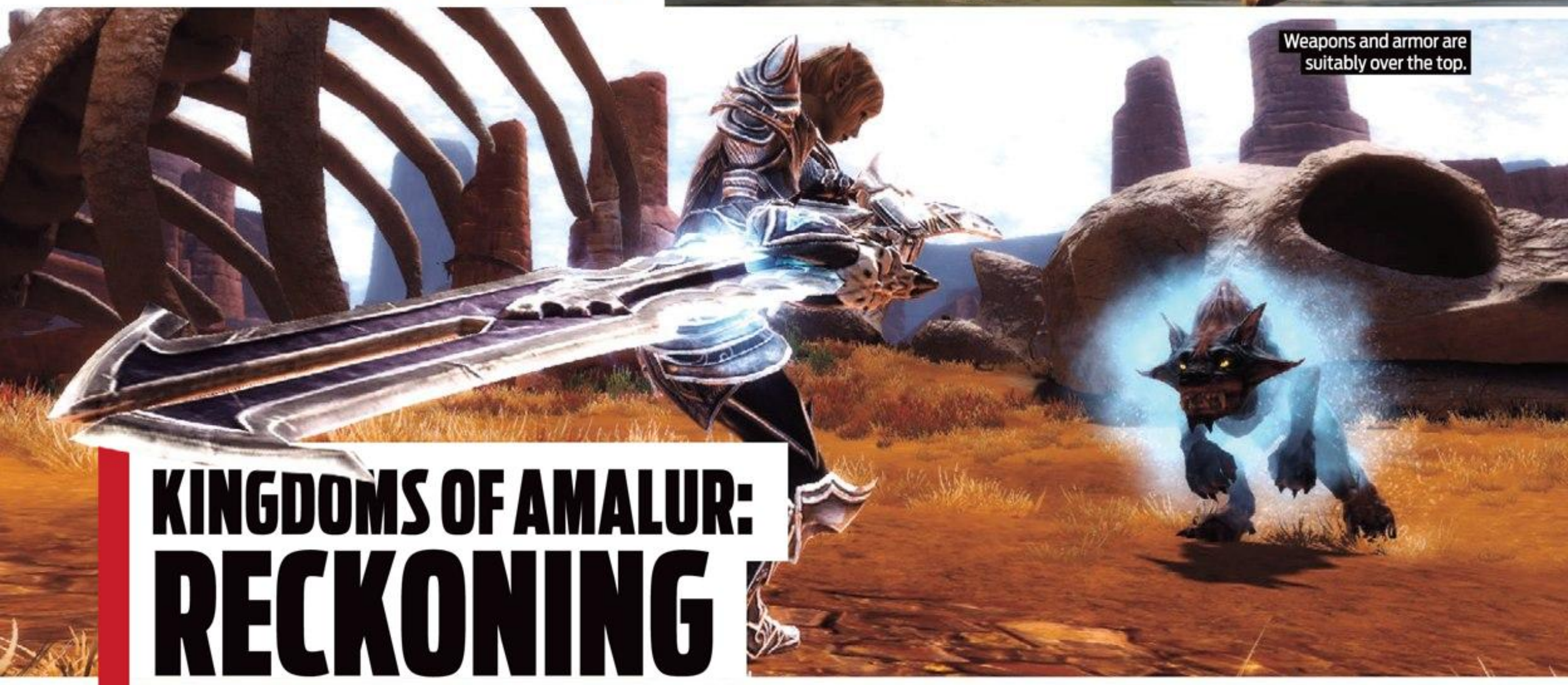
"Let's stand firm, lads. Lads?"

Helmets with eye-holes are for losers.



Weapons and armor are suitably over the top.

KINGDOMS OF AMALUR: RECKONING

PLAYED IT Trouncing Tuatha and beating Balor in an action-heavy RPG

Jumping into the shoes of a mid-level character, I find that *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning* isn't quite the RPG I'm expecting. A major set-piece battle—the siege of Mel Senshir—is well underway by the time my magic-wielding elf lady arrives. The forces of good are holding out against the Tuatha: nasty-looking bald folks in gunmetal armor with spiky red pauldrons.

Reckoning's "Destiny" system stands in for classes, enabling you to switch between different sets of bonuses on the fly. I'm an Acolyte—a mage who can teleport short distances—but I've got stealth and melee skills as well. I'm not sure how useful stealth is likely to be: I'm wielding a pair of enormous chakrams (bladed discs) that crackle with mystical lightning, my hands stream with poisonous energy, and I'm surrounded by a glimmering magical shield. I'm a walking rave.

Combat is more *Darksiders* than *Diablo*, with a combo system tied to timed button presses and an energy bar that can be used to trigger finishing moves. I use a charged attack to send my chakrams whirling around each fight like Tron discs, before switching to my secondary weapon, a pair of flaming glaives, to finish enemies in close combat. Magic attacks range from a lightning blast that paralyzes enemies to a fan of throwing knives and freezing landmines.

My character rams a spear of spirit energy in the Balor's eye. The siege of Mel Senshir is over.

The creator of the *Spawn* comic books, Todd MacFarlane, is credited as *Reckoning*'s art director, and his influence shows in the cyclopean monster, a Balor, that lurches towards the battlements. It's a vast, one-eyed green slug with insectile talons, rows of shark's teeth, and a powerful ocular laser. What began as a health-bar-whittling skirmish has become a boss battle, of the pattern-memorizing, attack-dodging kind.

From here on in, it's easy to forget that *Reckoning* is an RPG. I fling lightning at the Balor's eye, throw chakrams into its mouth, and slash at its claws when they become embedded in the stone. At the climax, I'm treated to a "Fateshifting" finishing move. A quick time event triggers—my character pins the Balor with bolts of spectral ice, then summons a giant energy spear and rams it into the monster's eye.

The beast falls, and the siege of Mel Sanshir ends. The camera pans out, and after a loading screen I'm left in the middle of a town square packed with vendors and NPCs. In front of me is a man with a great big yellow exclamation mark above his head. In the space of a load, the game has transitioned from linear brawler to zone-based single-player MMO. It's a jarring change of pace, but also an interesting one: despite the clichéd fantasy trappings, there are a lot of ideas churning beneath *Reckoning*'s surface. ■

Chris Thursten

READ ME

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

DEVELOPER
38 Studios and Big Huge Games

LINK
reckoning.amalur.com

Release FEBRUARY

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Sniper's Berlin has been painstakingly recreated.

SNIPER ELITE V2

FIRST LOOK Blasting Nazis in the groin as the psychopaths of World War II

Sniper Elite was, in the words of Rebellion's CEO and Creative Director Jason Kingsley, a game "more people have heard of than actually played." The tactical third-person shooter was set during World War II, with the player sneaking and sniping his way through the Nazi army while trying to discover the secrets of the atomic bomb.

You're peering down that same sniper's gun sights this time around, but now World War II is drawing to a close. The Nazis are almost defeated, the Soviets have invaded Germany, and it's V2 rockets that you're investigating this time around—hence the name. "[The end is] the most interesting part of any war," says Steve Hart, *Sniper Elite V2*'s producer. "You're just this lone wolf engaging two separate armies for your own gain."

READ ME
PUBLISHER Rebellion
DEVELOPER In-house
LINK www.rebellion.co.uk

Since the first game's release in 2005, many have fallen in love with modern combat. For Rebellion though, the WWII setting remains a perfect fit. "It's one of the more modern wars where it's clear who the enemy are, and it's a just fight," says Kingsley. Vietnam, Korea and the Gulf War were touted, but the blurriness of just who the good guys are in those conflicts made Rebellion stick to the good-old bad days.

Rebellion is keen to stay away from the closed level design that defines modern shooters.

Rebellion is keen to stay away from the entrenched, closed level design that defines modern shooters, too. The pre-alpha build I saw was set in crumbling Berlin, with multiple paths the player is free to move between. When you've found your angle of approach, you'll take out most enemies in the same way: lift the scope, and shoot them in the head.

It's here that *Sniper Elite* plays its trump card, with a close-up X-ray vision of the bullet hitting the bad guy, shattering vertebrae or ripping the crown off his head. It's giddily gory stuff, and it's procedurally generated so few bullet hits will happen in the same way. Hart's team has seen about 125 animations, but they reckon there are over 500 potential ways a bad guy can eat a lump of hot lead.

And Rebellion hasn't stopped at necks and heads. It went to the extent of including testicles in the X-ray animation. If you shoot enemies in just the right way—presumably from behind while they're on all fours—their man-eggs will rupture and split open. No one has fetishized the effects of bullets on bodies like this since *Soldier of Fortune*, and it's equally as discomforting.

Those crotch-shots, which are sure to guarantee the game's infamy, aren't the only thing that'll change each time you play. The AI will respond differently to

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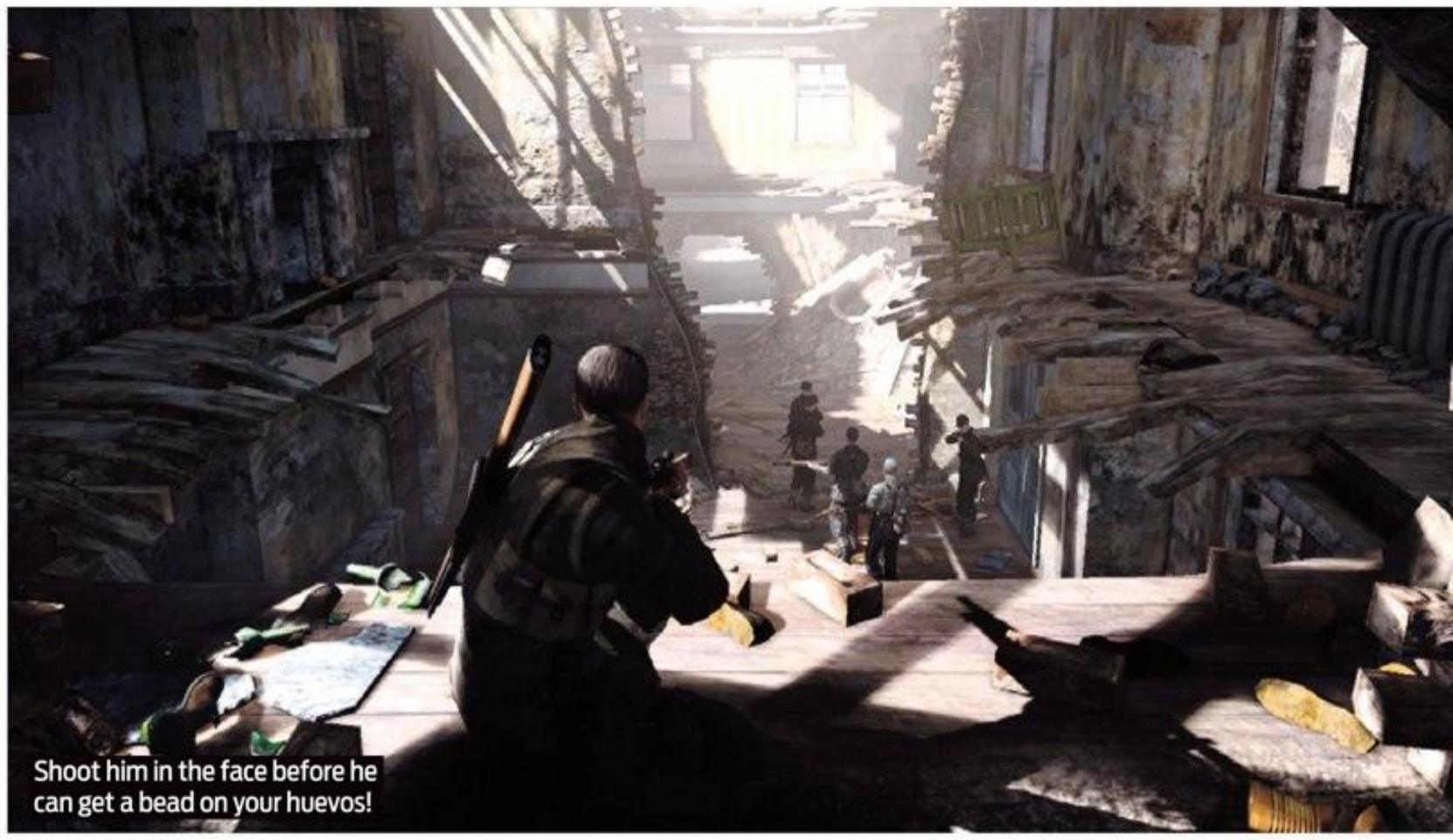
Locations, weapons, vehicles, uniforms and other details are all spot-on.

Up a little...down a smidgen... left a tad...crotch-shot!



Shoot him in the face before he can get a bead on your huevos!

threats depending on where you're coming from, and the multiple potential routes ensure you'll always find a different way to approach them. "I'll try that level again" says Kingsley. "And this time I'm going to try sneaking in differently, try another route through, and I'll see what happens...oh [crap], yeah that's cool."

Despite Rebellion's colorful take on combat, the team is keen to ensure that the setting and events are realistic, which may or may not include the notion that snipers were the most horrible people in the war. "They're mad, they're quite sick," says Hart. "And this is why they ate alone. Even their own hated them."

Cold-blooded tactics

This hatred is said to be due to the sheer psychopathy of snipers. Certain Russian snipers killed hundreds of people in reality, employing cruel tactics which are readily available in the game. Shoot a soldier in the leg and he'll lie there screaming in pain as his comrades come out of the woodwork to rescue him. "Shall I shoot now?" asks Hart. "No, no, no, I'll just wait. Let's give them that sense of hope. And just as they're about to come in, 'Now!' And you get that epic kill cam."

Sniper Elite V2 will be self-published by Rebellion on the PC, which Kingsley reckons will bring in more money for the company as well as provide a fluid experience for PC gamers. "It's incredibly frustrating as a developer and a game player to not be able to change something that you know needs changing," says Kingsley. "We can now, and we are going to be supporting it."

Although the sniper genre is intrinsically limited, it's a good match for Rebellion, which can put all its efforts into a polished experience after 2009's patchy, indecorous *Aliens vs. Predator*. It's a nice riposte to current shooters too, with Rebellion returning to the battlegrounds where *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* were conceived. ■ ***Henry Winchester***

Wolfgang's car not passing its smog check was the least of his problems.

Release MARCH 2012

"I *knew* I shouldn't have left that banana peel there!"

MASS EFFECT 3

PLAYED IT The Normandy's D-Day is fast approaching

At the center of the roleplaying petri dish, a colorful swirl of games are gently bleeding into each other. Flat-out action games adopt the character builds and XP systems of the traditional RPG, while roleplaying adventures of a certain mass-market mindset bury their statistics deep behind rows of headshots. *Mass Effect 3* looks to be a high point of this trend, with BioWare maintaining that it's set to make a leap in quality beyond *ME2* equivalent to the leap *ME2* made beyond the original.

Deep within BioWare HQ, I eagerly borrowed the keys to someone else's Shepard and sawed off enough Cerberus commandos to give this bold claim credence. The premise of my early mission was a violent race in the shadow of an encroaching sandstorm through a Mars mining facility.

READ ME
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER BioWare
LINK masseffect.com

A Prothean artefact with anti-Reaper qualities has been uncovered, and both Shepard and the Illusive Man gang dearly want it on their mantelpiece. Aided and abetted by new boy James Vega (heavily inspired by Sawyer from *Lost*) and whoever survived from the Ashley/Kaiden collective in *Mass Effect*, the advance in action quality is apparent from the start.

My mission was a race through a Mars mining facility in the shadow of an encroaching storm.

Shield-wielding enemies scuttle down parallel corridors to flank you while their buddies tactically retreat further up in the map, while the simple addition of verticality (ladders!) manages to spruce up level design. Sudden twists in the action were used sparingly in *ME2*, yet here they're laid end-to-end. Ambushes on incoming NPCs, surprise attacks from the dark through satisfyingly smashable windows, long-distance fire-fights on a moving monorail—there's more life on the Red Planet than you might expect.

The primary draw of *ME3*, however, is its role as a grand finale. It begins with a hastily convened meeting between Shepard, Anderson and the woefully prepared leaders of Earth on the day the Reapers (the caretakers of the galaxy, who sweep up all organic life every 50,000 years) finally make their eventful return.

The skies outside the window are suddenly pierced by vast Reapers descending like clawed fists, who go on to stomp futuro-Vancouver's skyscrapers and destroy all that stands in their path with unworldly *phftang*! noises. Before anyone has time to comment on the scene's *War of the Worlds* feel, the room is awash with flames and broken glass. Shepard's quest to unite the disparate races of the galaxy against their common enemy has begun.

If you're a returning hero, then your reputation and prior activities in the galaxy will take its toll on your recruitment drive. Gazing into the development toolkit of Lead Writer Mac Walters—a busy nest of

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Earth might be in ruins, but that's no reason not to wear a stylish jacket.

Some men just want to see the world burn. And explode.

Hey! It's that guy from *Crusader: No Remorse*! And he's pissed.

stored decisions feeding into a mesh of dialog possibilities—feels a little like being in freefall. "It took three months at the beginning of this project to deal with the decision to kill off any of the henchmen at the end of *ME2*," he says. "They're all major characters, but they all could be dead. What were we thinking?"

The first game's binary choice of whether you save Kaiden or Ashley means you'll have either the sensitive soldier or the brunette space racist onboard (both suspicious of Shepard's dealings with Cerberus in *ME2*) but previous decisions made over the Rachni queen, the Collector base, the Genophage, the Geth and good old Wrex will also come back to alternately haunt or help you. Getting a perfect playthrough and appeasing enough alien races is promised to be very tricky indeed.

Enter stage left *Mass Effect*'s controversial Galaxy at War system, a sort of social metagame hub where your success in *ME3*'s horde-based co-op multiplayer (and the Facebook games and apps) serves as a multiplier to your proficiency against the Reapers on the approach to the endgame. You're presented with the forces you've amassed, including characters such as Samara and contingents of Asari Commandos and Mindbenders, and encouraged to shuttle them between Reaper troublespots. It's a needless addition, but a forgivable one if it turns out to be fun. Shepard's adventures tend to consume body and soul, so being able to aid the war effort while on the bus has a certain allure.

Inside and out, *Mass Effect 3* is laced with feelings of wartime chaos and desperate grasps at hope. As I stood in the BioWare writers' room I couldn't help but notice stirring Winston Churchill quotations pinned above the door. Anything in the game that lacked urgency has been trimmed (goodbye mining), and wherever you fly you'll see charred space detritus or fleets of doomed warships. The final battle will soon be upon us, and the body-count will be high. How high? That's up to you. ■ ***Will Porter***

Release MARCH 2012

RELEASE METER

3 MONTHS AWAY

ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES

Ready to scream humiliating Bill Paxton quotes with the utmost sincerity? Gearbox is taking you back to the ravaged LV-426 colony on a search for Ellen Ripley.

Release MARCH 31

PROTOTYPE 2

Ever wonder what Spider-Man would look like if he slung guts and intestines instead of webs? Wonder no more! Toss out crimson tendrils to possess enemies and brutalize bigger baddies.

Release APRIL 24

DOTA 2

The Ancients have been well defended in beta stages for some time, so don't be surprised if Valve's follow-up to the game that started MOBA mania drops sooner rather than later.

Release EARLY 2012

SPEC OPS: THE LINE

The line: Johnny Cash walked it and you can too when the *Spec Ops* series returns to the PC. Set in Dubai, your toughest obstacle will be randomly generated sandstorms.

Release APRIL 30

6 MONTHS AWAY

MECHWARRIOR ONLINE

Battlemechs make their triumphant return and even better, it won't cost a thing to play. Nothing can prepare you for this onslaught (except maybe watching *Robot Jox*).

Release SUMMER 2012

SOUTH PARK: THE GAME

From the dev behind *Dungeon Siege III* and *Fallout: New Vegas* comes...Lemmiwinks?! Yep, Obsidian's working with Trey Parker and Matt Stone on a *South Park* RPG.

Release Q2 2012

COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

The world's most refined multiplayer FPS is getting yet another upgrade. Gripe all ya want, at least classic maps, such as Aztec and Dust, have never looked better.

Release Q2 2012

BROTHERS IN ARMS: FURIOUS 4

Take *Left 4 Dead*'s co-op, add a dash of *TF2* character design, then remind us how awesome *Inglourious Basterds* is and—BANG—*Brothers in Arms: Furious 4*!

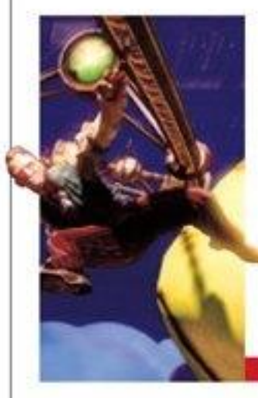
Release Q2 2012

9+ MONTHS AWAY

DIABLO III

Who knows when this free pack-in with your Annual *WoW* Pass will appear in full? Regardless, you'd be wise to invest in a new mouse—your life is about to get 3000 percent clickier.

Release TBD 2012



BIOSHOCK INFINITE

Sweet Rapture! A place where people travel by rollercoaster and heroes run from giant mechanical birds and manipulate ripples in space-time? We can't wait to take to the skies of Columbia.

Release 2012

PLANETSIDE 2

With almost a decade's worth of lessons learned, Sony Online Entertainment is heading back to its sprawling MMOFPS with better balancing and a modern free-to-play model.

Release 2012

COMMAND & CONQUER GENERALS 2

A BioWare-developed *C&C* game?! Sounds like an interesting mix. We've always wanted to control a tank using dialog trees. First one to romance China wins!

Release 2013

BEST GUESS

Far Cry 3

Far Cry 3 is rapidly rising through the ranks of 2012's must-play titles. Unfortunately, we've seen neither hide nor hair of the game since it was unveiled at last year's E3. We're antsy to get back to the jungle too, but as long as the game doesn't launch with the same save-corrupting, game-crashing, character-vanishing issues in *Far Cry 2*, we're more than willing to wait.

ON YOUR RADAR THE TOP 13 MOST-ANTICPATED PC GAMES

1. DIABLO III
2. GUILD WARS 2
3. **TOMB RAIDER** ▶▶
4. BIOSHOCK INFINITE
5. RESIDENT EVIL: RACCOON CITY
6. MASS EFFECT 3
7. FAR CRY 3
8. TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW 6: PATRIOTS
9. STREET FIGHTER X TEKKEN
10. MAX PAYNE 3
11. HITMAN: ABSOLUTION
12. PROTOTYPE 2
13. INVERSION

"The development of Lara has gone hand-in-hand with my development as a gamer from age 13 to 30."
—@ultra2xtreme, via Twitter

"... the thought of a Bear Grylls simulator has me intrigued."
—@David_Wales, via Twitter

Source: Ipsos OTX GamePlan Insights. Top titles based on purchase intent are collected via a weekly tracking study of 1,000 active gamers in the US between the ages of 13-59. Since launching in 2008, GamePlan has collected data on over 100,000 gamers across 2,500+ titles.

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Top 100 Games of All Time

Every year, the global *PC Gamer* Brain Trust convenes to combine our lists of PC gaming's finest works and votes them down to a single list of the best games of all time. The second part's the tough one. In fact, it might even be impossible, if we didn't decide in advance that we'd rinse the nostalgia out of our master list and leave only those games that remain the Top 100 we'd want to play today.

You can work your way up the list, or play your way down: however you use it, you can rest assured that you'll get a tour of the peaks of PC gaming culture.

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100 Test Drive Unlimited 2

Release: 2011

Andy: *TDU2* re-creates an entire tropical location (in this case, the *entire* islands of Ibiza and *TDI*'s Oahu) and sets you loose with scores of customizable, chick-magnet performance cars. The vehicle exteriors, authentic dashboards, and lush scenery will all keep you motoring for hours.

99 Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath

Release: 2010

Chris A: One of the most unique FPSes ever. Wonderful character design, an engaging story, and a wild, western world where living creatures comprise your ammunition. Hey, if it weren't worth revisiting, why would somebody bother retrofitting this relative obscurity with an HD-enhanced upgrade?

98 Shift 2 Unleashed

Release: 2011

Andy: EA may have dropped the *Need For Speed* part of the title, but *Shift 2 Unleashed* is clearly a continuation of the mega-selling series. Developed by the same people that gave us *GTR*, *Shift 2* boasts authentic simulation roots while still keeping things accessible for the casual crowd.

97 Magic: The Gathering—Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012

Release: 2011

Evan: We play a girl-alienating amount of unironic *Magic* around the office. *Duels* happens to be the cheapest ticket ($10) in our dimension to spend hours in *M:TG*'s timeless ruleset and memorable mechanics. Relaxing and gently-presented, it's best played while clawing a tumbler of Mountain Dew.

96 Star Trek: A Final Unity

Release: 1995

Logan: You couldn't ask for an adaptation more faithful to the principled, optimistic, let's-not-shoot-everything-on-sight spirit of the *Next Generation* series than *A Final Unity*. You could even delegate engineering and tactical control to La Forge and Worf if you wanted a more straight-up adventure game experience.

95 Psychonauts

Release: 2005

Tom F: Some games treat their levels as obstacle courses to teach you their mechanics. In *Psychonauts*, the levels are king: each one is a fresh idea, and everything from the art to the mechanics are custom-built to make that weird place real. Every level is a genuine adventure.

94 Killing Floor

Release: 2009

Evan: Tripwire makes the best viewmodels, ugh. Those dual Desert Eagles—kicking in slow-mo, their slides shifting and shrugging out burnt brass—are more pornographic than *Battlefield*'s full gun library. I love the way *KF*'s difficulty can swing in an instant: I'll be calmly picking off Clots, lining up triple headshots with my crossbow, when a Fleshpound or a few Sirens come out of nowhere and break up the defensive position that's worked flawlessly for the past 15 minutes. Thus begins a Benny Hill-style retreat around the level, a train of freaks trailing you the whole way.

93 Peggle

Release: 2007

Graham: It's almost random, but has just the barest lick of skill necessary to make its relentless praise and animal cheeriness feel like it's of your making. It's a game that anyone can enjoy, whether you're playing it alone or projected fifteen-feet wide onto a wall at a party. **Chris T:** *Peggle*'s precision-engineered reward mechanisms create a feedback loop that almost make me resent it for taking advantage of OH LOOK BEETHOVEN AND UNICORNS.

92 Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines

Release: 2004

Chris T: It's rough around the edges, but *Bloodlines*' evocation of vampire-occupied Los Angeles is unlike anything else. There are some extraordinary set-pieces, particularly the haunted hotel sequence, and the attention paid to creating different experiences for every bloodline makes it one of the most replayable sims ever.

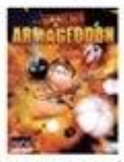
91 Command & Conquer

Release: 1995

Graham: The intermission cutscenes are remembered for their hammy acting, but what gets lost is how *cool* they were. They let you see ten-pixel high units as full human beings, and illustrated the escalating conflict between the GDI and the Hand of Nod with increasingly sweaty, haggard actors yelling at you. From the install process onwards, *C&C* sold you a fantasy of being a commander in a futuristic war.

90 Worms Armageddon

Release: 1999



Tom F: A guaranteed way for two people to spend 20 straight minutes laughing. Your toolbelt of conventional and idiotic weapons obey simple rules, but the randomized battlefields and volatile elements lead to spectacular calamity with almost every shot. Usually for the shooter.

89 Mount & Blade: Warband

Release: 2010

Tim Stone: Hacking a heavily-armored professional soldier to death should be hard. Putting an arrow through the head of a fleeing bandit at 50 yards while riding a galloping horse should be hard. TaleWorlds grasp this and, even better, the developer realizes that all the best picaresque adventures are self-authored.

88 Star Wars Combine

Release: 1998

Josh: I've played the free, browser-based *Star Wars Combine* for 12 years. Its *EVE*-like focus on corporations and politics, with more role-playing options and hardly any graphics to speak of, produces the most memorable emergent gameplay I've ever experienced.

87 Tribes 2

Release: 2001

Chris T: If movement isn't fun, why have a big map? If players are soaring through the air and sliding down mountains, why settle for boring guns? Skiing and spinfusors are two of the greatest concepts in large-scale multiplayer, and *Tribes 2* combined them with the best map design in the series.

86 R.U.S.E.

Release: 2010

Rob: It takes nerve to look at what every other RTS is doing, and then chuck it aside and create a completely new kind of game. *RUSE* showcases WWII in all its destructive glory: massive Italian siege guns demolish entire forests while British bombers carpet bomb factories amidst torrents of AA fire and dogfighting Messerschmitts and IL-2s.

85 Duke Nukem 3D

Release: 1996

Chris C: Rife with innuendo, absurd sci-fi, profanity, and *Army of Darkness* references—Duke's personality has yet to be bested (that's including the Duke in *Duke Nukem Forever*, mind you).

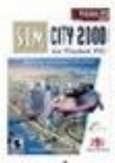
84 MechCommander

Release: 1998

Evan: Squad-based *Diablo* with mechs. *MechCommander* is constant evidence that isometric, sprite-based games can live forever.

83 SimCity 2000

Release: 1993



Evan: For me, *SimCity 2000* was mostly about sending various spinning tops into premade metropoli and watching the fire spread. Phoning in a tornado, earthquake, or robot-alien and watching the unemployment ripple out was like playing dominoes with ten thousand tiny lives. Oh, and it has one of the best-ever color palettes in gaming. Pretty!

82 Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition

Release: 2011

Owen: Why is *Street Fighter* the only fighting game in our Top 100? Because it's the only one that prioritizes mind games over muscle memory, no matter your skill level. Whether learning to toss your first fireball or mastering a 30-input combo string in a training session, this is the definitive version of the ultimate fighting series.

The panel

Who voted for the PC Gamer Top 100

The Top 100 panel is comprised of PC gaming experts from around the world.

Andy Mahood
Sim Columnist, *PC Gamer*

Chris Antista
Associate Editor, *PC Gamer*

Chris Comiskey
Managing Editor, *PC Gamer*

Chris Thursten
Freelancer, *PCG UK*

Desslock
RPG Columnist, *PC Gamer*

Evan Lahti
Senior Editor, *PC Gamer*

Graham Smith
Deputy Editor, *PCG UK*

Josh Augustine
Associate Editor, *PC Gamer*

Logan Decker
Editor-in-Chief, *PC Gamer*

Nathan Grayson
Freelancer, *PC Gamer*

Owen Hill
Web Editor, *PCG UK*

Richard Cobbett
Freelancer, *PC Gamer*

Richard McCormick
Associate Editor, *PCG UK*

Rob Zacny
Strategy Columnist, *PC Gamer*

Tim Edwards
Editor, *PCG UK*

Tom Francis
Section Editor, *PCG UK*

Tom Senior
Freelancer, *PCG UK*

Tyler Wilde
Associate Editor, *PC Gamer*

How did we pick these games?

Generations of people have speculated at the secret method *PC Gamer* applies to construct its Top 100 list. Are wizened Nepalese monks consulted? Are spirit quests embarked upon? Perhaps a raccoon death tournament—each mammal representing a different game—determines who wins? No.

The Top 100 simply represents the games we love, ranked by how much we love them. Our goal is to give you an actionable resource—a list of what you and any PC gamer should play today. To that end, historical significance doesn't matter in our selection; weighing nostalgia over what's fun now wouldn't provide a useful list.

We hope our long process of assaulting one another with our opinions sparks the same passion in you. Share it with us at letters@pcgamer.com.

81 Star Wars: KotOR 2
Release: 2005

Nathan: *KotOR* popularized the "light side, dark side" morality system, but *KotOR 2* broke it down into tiny pieces. While everyone else struggled to paint in broad strokes of black and white, *KotOR 2*'s Kreia forced players to see gray and question the very ideals around which *Star Wars* is based. More importantly, she never gave a definitive answer. That was the player's job.

80 Batman: Arkham Asylum
Release: 2009

Logan: Makes hand-to-hand combat in every other game that came before it seem pitifully obsolete, like beehive hairdos and telephone booths.

79 Deus Ex: Human Revolution
Release: 2011

Graham: Adam Jensen initially seemed like sort of a jerk—the kind of guy who would deliberately trim his beard into a pointy triangle. But *Human Revolution* is most surprising in how good a role-playing game it is. The tools and dialog all give you tremendous choice in how you want to play, but they also give you the power to create and embody a character. I didn't ask for this, but I like it.

78 Take Command: 2nd Manassas
Release: 2006

Rob: A game as much about the limitations of command as it is about tactics, *TC2M* often places you in charge of a smaller unit in a much larger battle. Is that AI-controlled brigade redeploying to meet a new threat, or is its general abandoning you? Are you fighting Confederate pickets, or is an entire enemy division lurking beyond those trees? This is like being a character in the movie *Gettysburg*. No wargame makes you feel more like a general.

77 EVE Online
Release: 2005

Josh: A politics and greed simulator that's probably entertained more people who haven't played it than any other game ever made. Its players are passionate, dramatic, and downright awesome—watching them interact with each other is the best reality TV show mankind may ever produce.

76 Limbo
Release: 2011

Tom F: A nightmare in silhouette: beautiful, sad and terrifying. The shadow-puppet presentation lets your brain fill in the details of the dark shapes stalking you, and the pixel-perfect animation makes them uncomfortably real. Even the other humans in this world move with a silent menace. It's a horrible place to be. I love it.

75 Homeworld
Release: 1999

Rob: This is what the *Battlestar Galactica* game should be. Its sparse soundtrack and radio chatter create an incredible feeling of being the admiral of a lost star fleet, desperately rallying your forces for one battle after another. Like space itself, *Homeworld* is cold, tragic, and grand.

74 Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II
Release: 2009

Evan: I say it every year: the Space Marines are gaming's best action figures. Eyeing them from a cloud's distance, ordering them around—it's the same feeling you get marching LEGO men around your living room against your sister's entrenched dolls. Who are actually Orks.

73 Divine Divinity
Release: 2002

Chris C: It's pretty much a 2D *Skyrim*. That plays like *Diablo*. With the voice-acting of *Dragon Age*. And the writing of *Planescape: Torment*. *DD* took all the best parts of other games and stuck 'em in a blender. Never taking itself too seriously, you could stumble across a terrifying demon in one room and then a pair of nerdy skeletons discussing existentialism in the next.

72 F1 2011
Release: 2011

Rob: Codemasters' *F1* series is the first racing game that really understands that racing is also a sport that involves teams, engineers, drivers, and their agents. Practice, qualifying, and performance testing all get their due alongside the races.

Andy: Not only that—F1 cars finally *feel* like F1 cars, with compliant suspension and a proper sense of mass. Codies is definitely getting better at this stuff.

70 DiRT 3
Release: 2011

Andy: *DiRT 3* takes high speed gravel-spitting to a new level. I sucked at the new Gymkhana discipline, but there's so much else to do here I didn't care. The biggest danger I encountered was driving into trees, snow banks, and other obstacles while admiring the gorgeous Finnish and Kenyan scenery. Codemasters' EGO gaming engine really works overtime here to produce picture postcard backdrops.

69 Jagged Alliance 2
Release: 1999

Rob: What an incredible memory machine. Every firefight could create indelible moments, such as when the markswoman bled out as she killed the sniper who doomed her, or the time your squad was hunted through the night, only to turn the tables with an ambush at dawn.

68 Frozen Synapse
Release: 2011

Nathan: By allowing players to experiment with their every move mid-match, *Frozen Synapse* created a psychological battleground where every second guess is a potential landmine. "Maybe he'll do this. Or maybe he'll do that. But wait, he sometimes wears non-matching socks on purpose, which almost certainly reveals... *what have I become*?"

67 Gabriel Knight 2: The Beast Within
Release: 1995

Rob: An interactive movie that really was. An uncommonly engaging adventure.

Logan: *Gabriel Knight 2* is the adventure game equivalent to an Umberto Eco novel, weaving historical fact, conspiracy, and baroque characters into a dark, gorgeous, creepily humorous tapestry. It's a reminder that great games, like great books, make us hungrier for knowledge about the real world.

66 Wing Commander 3: Heart of the Tiger
Release: 1994

Rob: This is series-gaming at its finest. It uses characters from the previous games, and the history they created, to really immerse you in the life of an exhausted hero about to finish his career in obscurity aboard a once-proud warship. Strong, talented acting and great mission design make this a masterpiece, one that puts other supposed trilogies to shame. This is how an epic ends.

65 Titan Quest
Release: 2006

Tom F: A beautifully crisp, globe-trotting RPG click-'em-up. It's unmistakably built to the *Diablo* template, but it's more free-form: you can combine any two of its many classes to come up with unconventional builds. And it's lovely: not randomizing the levels allowed the devs to craft gorgeous renditions of ancient China, Greece and Egypt.

64 PlanetSide
Release: 2003

Rich M: Remember the time we loaded up a dropship with eight people, secured a Reaver escort, and flew out to Cyssor to secure a vital base and stem the Vanu tide? Remember when we hacked a Prowler and held off a Terran Republic assault in the jungles of Hossin? If you played *PlanetSide*, you do. And you will for the rest of your gaming life. Less a game, more a bona fide digital heroism generator.

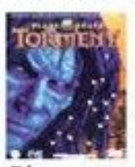
63 Close Combat 2: A Bridge Too Far
Release: 1997

Rob: Wargames are too often bloodless and abstract, but the *Close Combat* series emphasizes the human element. Soldiers freeze in combat, hardened veterans die suddenly from freak shell bursts, cowards might find their courage and win the day. *CC2* is the series' finest hour, operating at just the right scale to be intimate, and yet revealing the operational impact of all these personal dramas. Both sides need every last soldier and tank, but both must make sacrifices in the face of the odds.

62 Shogun 2: Total War
Release: 2011

Tom S: *Total War*'s heady mix of grand strategy, turn-based empire building and real-time battles threatens to overwhelm anyone who steps into the war room for the first time. *Shogun 2* reins in the sprawling ambition of *Empire* and *Napoleon* and delivers a more concentrated experience than both of them. It lets us create tales of death, glory and conquest with history's most revered warriors.

61 Planescape: Torment
Release: 1999



Rich C: What can change the nature of a man? It's the question at the heart of *Planescape: Torment*, and the perfect one for its mix of tragedy, philosophy and regret-tinged questing. Just look at your party: a talking skull, a puritanical succubus, the spirit of vengeance. It's one of the smartest games ever; an intelligent new direction for fantasy RPGs that absolutely nobody ever followed up on.

60 Arcanum
Release: 2001

Chris C: *Arcanum* is a thesis in player-character depth. My first trip through, I murdered Virgil the second he showed up, then went lone-wolf as a half-elf magic user with a penchant for cheap harlotry and booze. My second romp: I rolled as a charismatic capitalist gnome, collecting NPCs to do my technological dirty work. Having the Industrial Revolution stirred in with a reactionary, magic-using population is a setting unrivaled in RPGs. And that *music*...

59 Microsoft Flight Simulator X
Release: 2006

Andy: Microsoft may have disbanded the development team and scuttled the franchise, but *FS* still flies high with millions of users worldwide. As long as third-party devs like A2A and Abacus continue churning out new content, the old girl should stay fresh for years. Thanks to these add-ons, the sim's hard drive footprint has probably grown five-fold since I first installed it.

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Beyond Good and Evil

Release: 2003

Chris A: *BG&E*'s Jade isn't just one of the most tastefully depicted female protagonists of all time, she may very well be the most noble hero in all of gamedom. Let's lay this out: in between tending to a lighthouse filled with rescued orphans, she scans wildlife for scientific preservation and works as a journalist who exposes a human trafficking ring. Then she saves the planet from alien parasites and spurs an underground revolution to overthrow a military dictatorship. What did your favorite game character ever do, win a war?!

Logan: Games that inject gravitas by putting the fate of an entire world in your hands aren't unusual. What makes *Beyond Good and Evil* so special, so singular, is that it plunges us into a world that's worth fighting and dying for, one filled with beautiful, majestic creatures at land and at sea; a world that rewards our curiosity, not with hovering trophies tossed carelessly around the environment, but instead living specimens in a dazzling ecosystem of seemingly infinite variety.

Dungeons of Dredmor

Release: 2011

Evan: *Dredmor* is the only game that lets me build a mushroom-crafting, vampire-rogue that dual-wields shields and casts arithmetic as magic. I drink wine to regain MP; chew grilled cheese to regain health. I kill robots, carrot-people, genies. And I die—permanently—over and over and over and over. I've rerolled a character a dozen times in a day, but *Dredmor*'s thick wit lessens the pain of the game's inevitable, quick deaths so well.

Chris C: That humor goes so far. Few games have their own comedic voice—*Dredmor*'s is dry, referential (but not over-indulgent), Lovecraftian, and highly literate. And yeah, the funny tempers the gruesome ambushes your character is thrown into. Opening a monster zoo with 11 HP left, making the tactical decision to eat your Dire Sandwich, and then getting killed by a critical pelvis thrust is hilariously disastrous. Also, *Dredmor*'s agreeably retro graphics let you run it on anything, including most calculators.

Evan: Every opened dungeon door feels like another tug on *Dredmor*'s slot machine—a box that spills experience points, assorted cheese, booze, dwarven IEDs, magic potions, mustache spirits, and swords with names like "Angsty Blade of the Anti-Hero." Charmingly incongruent, dead-easy to play, detailed, and deep.

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57 Medal of Honor: Allied Assault

Release: 2002

Tyler: *Allied Assault* made me feel small. No longer was I a chaingun-wielding one-man army ripping apart an entire alien civilization. I was one soldier among many, firing one bullet at a time. It made me the star of the war movies I grew up loving, and the multiplayer was elegant, pure, and free of modern gimmicks.

56 Zeno Clash

Release: 2009

Nathan: I constantly lament the lack of truly alien worlds in gaming, but—in spite of its lack of vent cores that need frog-blasting—I think *Zeno Clash* is the closest our medium's ever gotten to something truly foreign. Bird people, brain-bending philosophy, off-the-wall art—it's all so gleefully insane. Having some of the finest first-person face-punching this side of *Riddick* doesn't hurt, either.

Evan: Like playing *Labyrinth* or *Dark Crystal* in the Source engine, except you get to hurt and maim absolutely everyone.

55 Hitman: Blood Money

Release: 2006

Graham: A rare action game that encourages you to play a certain way—by being undetected and efficient—but has the good graces to let you fail. Half the fun of *Hitman* is getting away with your assassination. The other half is screwing up, panicking, and working to clean up your own mess.

54 DC Universe Online

Release: 2011

Josh: So much about *DCUO* is future-looking—its cinematic presentation, action combat, flexible group roles, perfect armor collection system—that anyone remotely interested in MMOs should play it, comic book interest or no.

53 DCS: Flaming Cliffs 2

Release: 2010

Andy: It doesn't boast a clickable 3D cockpit like *DCS: A-10: Warthog* but this *Lock On: Modern Air Combat* survey sim expansion pack makes up for that with some terrific aircraft variety (seven potent fighter jets), rich single-player depth, and rock-steady netcode. If you're not an RTFM type, this ain't the sim for you.

52 Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon

Release: 2001

Chris C: *Ghost Recon*'s the game I show people when they want to know how Special Forces operate in real life. One shot will kill, and if your guys ever break team cohesion—wandering off alone—they'll eat a lead salad. You've gotta be disciplined and methodical to survive, and it recreates the tension and chaos that erupt from a firefight so accurately, it gives me wartime flashbacks.

51 Company of Heroes

Release: 2006

Tim: Legend has it the *CoH* team spent a year just working on the awesome Defense of Carentan mission, and it shows. German panzers gradually whittle away at your defenses while you desperately try and organize a retreat. *StarCraft II* may have the best multiplayer of any RTS, but I'd choose *CoH*'s awesome single-player campaign over Blizzard's any day.

50 Grand Theft Auto IV

Release: 2008

Graham: *GTAIV*'s metropolis is perhaps the only game world to have its own personality. Liberty City is huge, exciting, and a complete jerk. Like a lot of PC games, it's at its best when you form your own goals: try ragdolling from the tallest building, stealing helicopters from the airport, leaping motorcycles over buses in multiplayer, or installing mods that let you be Superman.

Evan: Remember when we turned off the vehicle friction in the handling.dat file, transforming Liberty City into a swirling sedan maelstrom that was incompatible with human life? Cars hunted civilians mercilessly. That might've been the most fun I had in 2011.

49 BioShock 2

Release: 2010

Rob: *BioShock* may have the best opening in PC gaming, but *BioShock 2* is a better shooter. Combat encourages more creativity and tactical variety, especially by forcing frequent "Alamo" moments. Its superb and emotional finale doesn't get enough recognition, and the "Minerva's Den" expansion just adds to the excellence.

Chris C: It's everything you loved in the original *BioShock*, tweaked to perfection (with an arguably superior plot). Also—you've got an auger-bit for a freaking hand!

48 MechWarrior 2

Release: 1995

Logan: I can't remember what videocard I had, probably a hand-crank model, but I played this at around 10 frames per second and loved every minute of it. By getting a few crucial things right—the mission design, the fantastic *ka-chunk ka-chunk* sound of your mech lurching forward—it didn't necessarily matter if you couldn't run it at the highest graphics settings or smoothest framerate. You were a giant polygonal box of death.

47 Rise of Flight

Release: 2009

Andy: The first WWI flight sim to get dogfighting aficionados excited since Dynamix's classic *Red Baron 3D*. Gorgeous graphics, sweet flight model, and superb AI make this a must-have for any serious dogfighter. Whether you shoot for an Iron or Victoria Cross, *Rise of Flight* injects your flyboy hips with some serious swagger.

46 Red Orchestra 2: Heroes of Stalingrad

Release: 2011

Rob: The simplest actions in *RO2* require skill and forethought. The things we take for granted in every other game are made new again. It's the only game where I often find myself holding my breath before taking a shot, or realizing my eyes are burning because I haven't blinked in about 10 minutes. Real, palpable tension.

Evan: I'm still amazed by the way *every single kill* feels earned. Detailed damage modeling makes the act of firing so cerebral—*RO2* cares if I peg a Soviet in the calf or the shoulder or the knuckles. Who would've thought that the most modern shooter in years would be one that features wooden, bolt-action weaponry? Tripwire loves PC gaming.

45 Max Payne 2

Release: 2003

Tyler: *Max Payne 2* is about as silly as noir gets, but it never winks at its audience to make sure we all know that it knows it's silly. It takes itself seriously to the end, and that somehow sucks me into its absurd melodrama, transforming me into a rogue cop with a chip on his shoulder and a half-empty bottle of painkillers in his pocket.

Logan: The original touched on this a bit timidly, but the sequel has some seriously deranged sequences—the giant hypodermic needle in the funhouse!—that leave you wondering what part is real and what parts are just the warped perspective of a really screwed-up guy. Oh, and bullet time.

44 Battlefield 1942

Release: 2002

Tyler: Why *Battlefield 1942* and not *Battlefield 3*? Why blurry textures and a limited physics engine over lens flares and F/A-18 Super Hornets? It's not just nostalgia—*Battlefield 1942* remains my standard for large-scale warfare because it demonstrates how simple mechanics and scenarios can stimulate player creativity and lead to something much more grand than may be apparent on the surface. My friends and I had hundreds of absurdly tense and complex *BF 1942* battles.

43 Quake III

Release: 1999

Graham: On its surface, we love *Quake III* for its railgun, its rocket launcher, and Q3DM17. Beneath that, there's infinite depths to mine if you want to become a better *Quake* player. How many seconds 'til that Mega Health respawns, and what route around the map will see you hit the choke-points and be back in time to pick it up again before the enemy? If you don't know, you keep playing. *Quake III* is slick, simple and pure. There's a reason why it was an eSport.

42 Star Wars: The Old Republic

Release: 2011

Josh: It's just come out, and *The Old Republic* is already the largest, most engrossing *Star Wars* universe ever made. This is a world you could believably live in—and with eight class stories at 200 hours each, you just might for awhile. On top of that, it manages to accomplish what most doubted was even possible in an MMO: meaningful player choice in major storylines. We can't wait to see what BioWare's able to turn this world into with a few expansions under its belt.

41 System Shock 2

Release: 1999

Rob: A true horror game. Not just because of the haunting and terrifying sound effects, or the persistent menace of the starship *Von Braun*'s shadowy interior. The story itself is a nightmare, as an alien collective infiltrates and quickly twists an entire crew into becoming a bloodthirsty hive-mind. Audio logs slowly reveal the villains who enabled the disaster, and the sad fate of the few doomed heroes who saw it coming. This is a game where, as each zombie begs for death, you remember they were once human.

Logan: What Rob said. I'd just add this: *System Shock 2* is terrifying because the entire game is situated in the idea that there are actually a lot of things worse than death. Aaaghh.

40 Bastion

Release: 2011

Logan: I love games like *Braid* and *Portal* for those mind-blowing moments and narrative twists that left me reeling, but *Bastion* achieved something much rarer. Instead of employing intellectual twists (no matter how ingenious and thought-provoking), it delivered an experience more like music, treating its sly narration, audio and art like melodic lines in a song. *Bastion* works its magic directly on the senses.

39 iRacing.com

Release: 2008

Andy: Some still whine about the subscription fees, but—if you need your sim racing to be accurate—nothing touches *iRacing*. Used by professional and amateur racers as well as tens of thousands of gamers, this is the *ne plus ultra* of PC racing technology. (You may even find Dale Earnhardt Jr. or Justin Wilson racing alongside you).

38 Half-Life
Release: 1998

Chris T: "Scripted sequence" wasn't always a dirty phrase, and *Half-Life*'s pace and spectacle is why. It didn't need to take control away to tell you a complete story, a feat that few games have ever managed. That scientist getting dragged into a vent is the precursor of every civilian we've ever been forced to watch die in *Call of Duty*, and I know which game I'd rather play.

Rich C: *Half-Life* was one of those rare games that made everything before it suddenly impossible to play any more. It put you right in the middle of the action, never wasted a moment unless you count the ones spent in Xen, and made it all seem so effortless.

37 Super Meat Boy
Release: 2010

Chris A: Several decades' worth of platforming reverence, subtly disguised as a highly-addictive, gorgeously-animated indie game! Tough and cathartic.

35 Age of Empires II
Release: 1999

Josh: *StarCraft II* can shove it. I don't want your fancy spaceships and weird aliens! I want a pile of historical civilizations stabbing each other with pointy sticks that evolve into iron spears. The graphics are homely nowadays, but the countering gameplay is still as addictively expansive as ever. This year's *Age of Empires Online* is a decent companion, but nothing beats the real thing with 18 unique civilizations.

34 Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar
Release: 1985

Logan: Years after I first played it, *Ultima IV* remains a singular experience because it makes you both hero and villain, on a quest to purify yourself and become worthy of the title of Avatar. It was, and still is, role-playing at its finest.

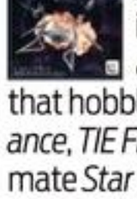
33 The Witcher 2
Release: 2011

Nathan: Some games offer you "choices." Maybe some dialog changes. Maybe you lose one party member you didn't care all that much about in the first place (I'm looking at you, Kaidan). *Witcher 2*'s second act was *completely* different based on your decisions. BioWare, I believe you just got beaten at your own game.

32 Batman: Arkham City
Release: 2011

Chris A: *Asylum* could be called the greatest detective game of all time, but *City* is the greatest Batman game. It has tone and music that are similar to the recent films, the voice actors from *Batman: The Animated Series*, and a storyline inspired by the *No Man's Land* comic series. But more to its credit, throwing *all* of Batman's villains into a less linear, open-world game forced players to make tough decisions, to think like Batman. "Do I rescue that hostage, or finish this fight...think, Bruce! THINK!"

31 The Last Express
Release: 1997



Rob: World War II looms so large that pre-World War I Europe is nearly forgotten. Yet Jordan Mechner vividly recreated that lost world from a few railroad cars and a handful of characters, as they journey aboard the Orient Express in late July, 1914. It's a heartbreaking allegory that never feels pedantic, and it humanizes the tragedies of the 20th century.

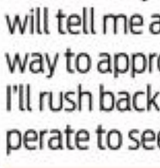
30 Star Wars: TIE Fighter
Release: 1994

Rob: Improving on *X-Wing* while avoiding the feature bloat and absurd difficulty that hobbled games like *Alliance*, *TIE Fighter* is still the ultimate *Star Wars* space combat game. It also enriches the universe, showing subtle facets of the Empire that Lucas never explored, like the fine line between good intentions and imperialism. It's a game about the kind of people who "just followed orders."

29 DCS: A-10 Warthog
Release: 2011

Andy: Easily the best combat simulation on today's market. Eagle Dynamics' insane level of detail and authenticity transform this Russian-built study sim into a legitimate weapon of war. Mate this Hog to a good HOTAS setup and you'll be the undisputed bully of the battlefield.

28 Deus Ex
Release: 2000



Tom F: The more great games come out, the more *Deus Ex*'s specific virtues come into focus. It's not the only game where stealth, shooting and exploration are all options. But it's the only one where the shooting is so dicey that you're desperate to avoid it, the stealth feels panicky and improvised, and exploration reveals clever ways to use the game's systems to trick and trap people. It's a near perfect formula, one we've never completely recaptured.

Tom S: Half the fun of *Deus Ex* is talking about it afterwards. Did you go through the window or out the door? Frontal assault or crawl through the vents? Even now, years later, someone will tell me a completely new way to approach a problem and I'll rush back to the game, desperate to see if it really works.

27 The Curse of Monkey Island
Release: 1997

Josh: Unlike the other *Monkey Islands*, *Curse* doesn't need a revamp. Its animated graphics are the perfect fit for LucasArts' cast, like Murray the demonic talking skull and that tiny jerk-of-a-pirate voiced by Gary Coleman.

26 Command & Conquer: Red Alert
Release: 1996

Tyler: Two sides, two primary resources (ore and power), straightforward unit balancing, and an angry bald dude—who needs more in an RTS? And the easily moddable "rules.ini" file kept it continuously fresh (my attack dogs had rocket barks!).

Evan: I love that damn Harvester truck. I love the way its metal jawbone hungrily, independently raises and lowers to hurl ore from the front of the truck into the bed. Other RTSes' gatherers bore me. You can have hero Probes or SCVs in *StarCraft*, I guess, but Harvesters are practically pets in *Red Alert*. They occasionally get lost. They fetch stuff for you. You'd roll your eyes when they revealed your position. And you're sad when they die. I love the complex relationship I have with that little guy. Oh, and Hell March—what an incredible Communist hymn.

25 Unreal Tournament 2004
Release: 2004

Evan: Instagib is goddamn ballet. It's one of FPS gaming's purest modes: the unending, tense dance of connecting a hitscan laser with other players at high speed.

Chris C: *UT2004*'s Assault maps are unrivaled in pacing and tension. Hopping along a speeding tank-truck as shock-rifle orbs detonate behind you, defending the bridge controls before boarding the mobile missile silo, watching your teammates miss the jump and pancake hilariously under the treads...pure shooter bliss.

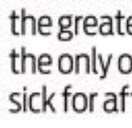
24 FreeSpace 2
Release: 1999

Tyler: The space combat simulation genre is a little sparse these days, but back in 1999 it birthed *FreeSpace 2*, which still features the most enthralling zero-G dogfights I've ever faced.

Rob: The most unforgettable set-pieces in the space combat genre, like running battles through storm-tossed nebulae, or racing through a battlefield to outrun an exploding star.

Tyler: The nebulae! Oh the nebulae! The space in *FreeSpace 2* may seem dated now, but I'm still impressed by its celestial vistas.

23 Grim Fandango
Release: 1998



Rob: *Grim*'s greatest achievement is its balance between humor and genuine darkness. Never has a field of flowers been so horrifying as at the end of this game.

Logan: Every character feels like a world unto themselves: the tough crime boss with a soft spot for a vain beatnik, the little *angelita* who cries when you mention her parents, an ambitious coat-check girl, and lonely, patient Flores who waits an eternity for his wife. You become privy to their quirks and their secret longings. For all its style, imagination, and flaming beavers, it's *Grim*'s unforgettable cast that places it among the greatest games ever—and the only one I've ever felt homesick for after I finished.

22 League of Legends
Release: 2009

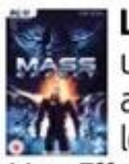
Josh: It's the mark of a truly great game to murder your addiction to its predecessors. Riot has moved the gameplay of this genre so far forward that it's almost impossible to look at the "old-school" DOTA-style games coming out with any excitement. Mundo and crew are carrying the banner forward, without any reason to look back. Not only that, the game's free-to-play formula is still the best model in the industry for letting paying players and free-loaders play side-by-side without detriment.

21 Left 4 Dead 2
Release: 2009

Evan: If you aren't downloading custom campaigns for *L4D2* yet, you're missing out on the best free content in gaming. There's a library of about 350 community campaigns living on www.l4dmaps.com, and dozens of them are more clever and less predictable than what Valve made.

Start with Questionable Ethics (and watch for its upcoming sequel), then go get Helm's Deep Reborn, Bedrooms 3, and Dead Before Dawn DC. In one called Urban Flight, our group fell through a set of damaged floorboards and found ourselves in a *Witch brothel*. Between us and the door? Six wailing zombie women with our unhappy endings in mind. Who cares if it was unbalanced—there was enough tension in the air to kill an adult alligator.

20 Mass Effect
Release: 2007



Logan: I have never understood the appeal of *Star Wars*; at least, not until I played *Mass Effect*. The complete immersion into a world—a universe—that *Star Wars* fans feel is what I experienced after my first two missions. The only fault I find with it are the Paragon/Renegade choices: the Renegade options you have throughout your missions ultimately feel out of sync with the larger story arc. It's the Paragon options that feel right to me; the series of tough choices, many of them resulting in horrific unintended consequences, that forge Shepard into an officer capable of leading the effort to save mankind.

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Stalker: Shadow of Chernobyl

Release: 2007

Rob: *Stalker* ruined me for every other shooter, permanently changing my hopes and expectations the same way *Half-Life* once did. *Stalker*'s Zone is not just an evocative and eerie setting, but a functioning ecosystem. Monsters hunt and live in nests, factions wage their wars, anomalies litter the landscape, and all of them treat you as if you are no more special than the next NPC.

Rich M: The Zone is an alien place, filled with twisted accidents and ethereal weirdness. *Stalker* itself is just as alien: a shooter that doesn't take players softly by the hand and guide them through prescribed corridors. Instead, you're unceremoniously dumped on a hillside, left utterly alone to peer through the rain and fog. Are those shapes, moving on the horizon? Why's there so much metal tangled up on that bridge? And what the hell is that, gurgling in the darkness? The landscape feels haunted, both by abstract, sad memories and literal radioactive ghosts that enjoy chucking stuff at you. Oh, and you can mod the hell out of it, too.

Chris T: You're not the hero of *Stalker*. In fact, no one is. Despite the imperative objective you're given at the beginning of the game, there's never a sense that you're more important or powerful than anyone else. You're on a mission, but so is everyone. You're good at killing, but so are the mercenaries and mutants who are hunting you—hell, so is the environment itself. It's an exercise in realizing how small and vulnerable you are.

The big ideas behind *Stalker*—the aimlessness of the universe, the constant striving toward the center of something that has no center—are embodied by the mechanics and structure of the game. That's rare, and worth commemorating.

Richard: I'm boycotting this one until they can say what "S.T.A.L.K.E.R." actually stands for. Which is a shame. I love the world and its atmosphere, but grammatical principles count!

Tom F: *Stalker* is one of the most atmospheric games ever made. The zone haunts you as you play, terrifying yet alluring. I lost count of the number of times I quit, scared out of my wits, only to start it up again minutes later, too fascinated to stop.

8

Arma 2: Operation Arrowhead

Release: 2010

Evan: What's more PC than an open-world sandbox that honors your ideas? *Arma* loves freedom as much as *Minecraft*, demands more synchronized teamwork than classic *Rainbow Six*, and—with a native mission editor—is more moddable than *Half-Life*.

No other game has equipped me with a set of strange, semi-practical skills. I can recite the NATO phonetic alphabet. I can read topographical maps. I have a new appreciation for compasses. I can tell you what a "staggered column" troop formation is. I can estimate ranges. I can (*finally*) float seamlessly into conversations about the trade-off in ammo capacity versus stopping power between 5.56mm and 7.62mm rounds with my crazy, gun-loving Michigan relatives.

Half of *Arma* is commuting to the action—hiking, flying, floating, or driving at-scale, often for kilometers—but the sparks of genuine tension and emergent war waiting at the end are always worth it. Here are a few: When you're face-in-the-grass and a dragonfly whirrs through your optics. Shooting out the tail rotor on a helicopter with an MG. Hijacking anything. Phoning in a ground target to your friend overhead in an F-35, laser-targeting it, and holding your breath as the bomb falls so you can hear the detonation. That feeling of having something deeply important (e.g. "Guys, guys, guys—they have anti-air.") to report to your teammates over radio. Rocket-strafing a village. Landing a first-shot headshot at 400m because you dialed-in your sights correctly. Hell, just map-reading—having an eye for safe LZs makes you an asset to the team.

All that stuff adds up to *Arma* being a profound war story generator. During one co-op mission our Blackhawk pilot had to fly us no higher than 30m off the surface to avoid radar detection. Over several clicks of variegated desert. We sat silent in the belly of the helo, clearing comms so our ace could concentrate. He got us in alive. And then, *for a full hour*, he waited on the ground, on-call, while 30 of us scrambled over Takistani hills like rats, raiding a radar base. He wasn't bored; he delighted in his role, and in the mutual military story we were writing with our decisions. He kept the engine warm for us. He was our getaway driver.

Arma's imperfections exist only because the developers attempted something ludicrously ambitious (64-player, high-fidelity warplay with realistic systems, hundreds of weapons and vehicles in a hundred-mile-wide warscape). But the emergent moments waiting to be mined from it are so personal and potent that they stick in your glands for weeks.

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19 Minecraft
Release: 2011

Tim: Yeah, someone's trying to recreate *Game of Thrones*' continent of Westeros in *Minecraft*. Yes, someone else made a to-scale replica of the starship *Enterprise*. But I think there's more fun in making a more humble thing in your private or shared world. A little amphitheater crafted from a natural cave. Maybe a railroad down into your mine. Maybe a lighthouse. Playing and making, with your friends, is one of the most rewarding pastimes in gaming.

18 Half-Life 2
Release: 2004

Nathan: *Half-Life 2* managed to both create the blueprint for the modern single-player shooter and be the genre's high water mark. It was first and, arguably, still is the best at what it does. Ravenholm still makes me yelp like a frightened puppy, Dog is still the reason my pets have crippling self-esteem issues, and I still keep a crowbar in my car's trunk. You know, just in case.

17 Half-Life 2: Episode 2
Release: 2007

Rob: *Episode 2* just does everything perfectly. You have an adventure in a mining complex with a hilariously tame Vortigaunt companion, a frantic last-stand against hordes of antlions, an ambush where Combine troops destroy a mansion around you, and finally: a battle with a legion of Striders.

16 BioShock
Release: 2007

Chris A: To this day, horror games remain little more than jump scares and sudden sound blasts. *BioShock*'s submerged tomb of forgotten dreams and broken promises consistently cranks out an ambiance far more discomforting than any blood-drenched wall or hulked-out zombie could ever hope for.

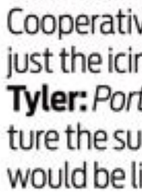
15 Diablo II
Release: 2000

Tyler: I love *Diablo II*'s aesthetic, which makes me feel like I'm living in a miniature model world like the kind once used to create film effects. I love the to-the-point occult story. And most of all, I love that when I think of the musty dungeons I explored, the undead monsters I killed, the items I collected, and the characters I played, the best word I can think of to describe it all is "neat." Everything in *Diablo II* is just really damn *neat*.

14 Portal 2
Release: 2011

Rob: It's funnier and even more endearing than its predecessor, and invents several new types of puzzle that make the *Portal* gun seem even more amazing. Perhaps *Portal* was perfect, but it's tough to go back to Aperture without Wheatley, GlaDOS, and Cave Johnson. Cooperative puzzle-solving is just the icing on the cake.
Tyler: *Portal 2* couldn't recapture the surprise of *Portal*—that would be like sneaking up on someone and catching them off guard, then trying to do it again while looking them in the eye and grinning. So it did the next best thing: it sat us down and told us a completely charming story, pulling back the curtain enough to satisfy the curiosity *Portal* inspired without revealing enough to kill its subtleties.

13 Quake
Release: 1996



Chris C: *Quake* isn't a game, it's a phenomenon. Without it, *TF2* wouldn't exist. Fatal1ty would be stocking groceries at Costco. QuakeCon would be...uh, StuffCon. And it's still amazingly playable. Perforating Fiends with Nine-Inch Nails and blasting Shamblers with quad-rockets is every bit as fun now as it was in '96. Dedicated servers still exist, and for good reason: *Quake* is the Dom Pérignon of FPS deathmatch.

12 Mass Effect 2
Release: 2010

Josh: It's been two years, and I still cannot hear Shakespeare's name or any reference to his work without the voice of an Elcor reciting the most moving lines in *Hamlet* (with less emotion than the tiny Australian lady trapped inside my GPS) popping into my head. *ME2* matched the incredible story of the original, and raised it with perhaps the best ending sequence ever made in a game. With the trilogy capper just around the corner ready to accept our saved game files, those poignant moments where Shepard makes a galaxy-defining decision or a companion's fate is sealed are more arresting than ever.
Logan: What's more, you're not simply asked to make a tough call and then everybody takes a deep breath and moves on. Instead, you have to grapple—intellectually, emotionally, politically—with the consequences of those decisions. And no matter what you do, innocent people who had no choice or influence in the matter are likely to suffer as a result of your decisions.
For me, those "character-defining" moments define the entire *Mass Effect* series.

11 Counter-Strike: Source
Release: 2004

Evan: From what dark magic does *CS* source its lasting appeal? Purity. It's one of the few modern multiplayer shooters that doesn't jangle with bells and whistles when it walks—there's no cover system, iron-sights, kill-streak rewards, air-strikes, vehicles, or unlockable anything—just you, some ballistic weapons, level geometry, and a few grenades.
I love the way dying in *Counter-Strike* stirs critical thinking. That time-out between respawns gives you a chance to iterate on tactics and change things up—camping instead of rushing, left instead of right, an AWP instead of an AK.

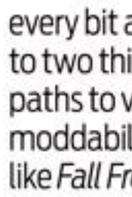
10 StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty
Release: 2010

Evan: It's the current foundation of eSports. I love *StarCraft II* because people—North American people—are gathering together in bars to watch it (www.reddit.com/r/barcraft). I love *StarCraft II* because IdrA, a player from my home state of Michigan, has a t-shirt that I can buy (http://bit.ly/gracken). And let's have a moment to celebrate *SC2*'s readability. The way armies animate and express players' intentions shows Blizzard's careful thinking and Frankensteinian craftsmanship; they imbue life and true personality into unit models. Without *SC2*'s ease-of-spectating, it'd simply be a game, not a rising culture that anyone can participate in.
Tim: I look at the design of the Zerg, Protoss and Terrans and just gaze in awe. It took thousands of years to balance chess. It took Blizzard just half a year following release to get the broad strokes of *SC2* in place. And all the units are different for each side. And there are dozens of different boards. And you don't take it in turns to play. And like Evan said, the animation is superior. Screw you, chess. We've got something much better.
Tom: Actually since the *en passant* rule was added in the 15th century, White has been OP.

9 Civilization IV
Release: 2005

Rob: *Civ IV* takes everything that was clever and addicting about the series and fixes or removes everything that fell short of perfection. It remains the pinnacle, and it is every bit as good today thanks to two things: several satisfying paths to victory, and the moddability that gave us gems like *Fall From Heaven*. As *Civilization V* proved, Firaxis broke the mold after making this one.
Tyler: We all love to joke about *Civilization IV*'s life-consuming nature, but for those who have been ensnared, it's not a joke. Nor do we regret any of the hundreds of hours we've spent building nations. At least I don't.

7 Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
Release: 2006



Chris C: There're those that boast about freedom and player choice, and then there's *Oblivion*. "Freedom" is putting it too lightly. Wanna ignore the main quest and butcher every single person in Cyrodiil? Go for it. Wanna spend 300 hours collecting Daedric weaponry to display in your corpse-rugged mansion? No problem. Punch bears down cliffs? Please do! Endlessly moddable and dizzyingly enormous, *Oblivion* is what happens when you let players create their own unique adventures, wholly independent of developer intent.

6 World of Warcraft
Release: 2004

Tim: There was a time, during the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion, where raiding was the most fun you could have in any game, ever. Delving into Ulduar—still the best dungeon the *WoW* team have created, was an adventure you looked forward to all week. The fights felt hard, but the mechanics understandable. One had you split your team—half to hold a gladiator's arena, the other to run a gauntlet of baddies to knock a boss off his pedestal. One saw you fighting a magic lady with ferocious tiger guards. Another had you launching yourself via catapult onto the back of a tank while the rest of your teammates poked it with dwarven APCs. *WoW* feels harder, more hardcore now and for that reason I've paused playing. But I miss it terribly.
Josh: With powerful contenders like *The Old Republic* and *Guild Wars 2* entering the field, Blizzard's starting to take big risks and tackle long-requested features to keep its playerbase. That pressure should lead to some very exciting developments to keep the game fresh for vets like us. Here's to the only other game besides *FarmVille* that our grandmas have ever heard of!

5 Dragon Age: Origins
Release: 2009

Chris C: *Dragon Age* took all the clichéd fantasy motifs and twisted them up delightfully. Instead of beautiful castles filled with nobles, we got filthy, racist cities populated by selfish elves and morally corrupted dwarves—and it was amazing. Each of your party's companions had their own agenda and motivations, and I'd often field opposing characters just to hear them banter and prod each other. If only every RPG after it had adopted the brilliant real-time/pause-able battle system.
Nathan: *Dragon Age* made me miserable. I was playing a "good" character, but I screwed up at every turn. By the time the credits rolled, I'd sacrificed my best friend in a moment of cowardice and driven away a woman I cared deeply about. But I accepted the guilt. I never once reloaded a save to "fix" a dumb mistake. *Dragon Age*'s world and characters were so convincing that I felt like they deserved me at my most authentic—even if that meant making some really stupid decisions.

4 Fallout 3
Release: 2008

Nathan: One of the (few) downsides of critiquing games for a living is that I can't really lose myself in them anymore. Most people watch the puppet show, but all I see are the strings. *Fallout 3* put the magic back in games for me. It gave me this giant, personality-packed universe to just *live* in. I still go back and wander the landscape when I need an escape. Most importantly, though, it taught me a very valuable life lesson: Tunnel Snakes rule.

3 Team Fortress 2

Release: 2007

Evan: *TF2* is Valve's invincible lab rat. It launched as an expensive reboot. Since then, Valve has made it free, quintupled the game's armory, added item crafting and trading, opened it up to community-designed items, hosted two Australian Christmases (among other absurd holiday events), and updated it an astonishing 267 times. It's the best-ever model for post-release support and one of the rare FPSes that provides equally great casual and competitive experiences.

Tyler: It's the only multiplayer FPS in which I can run around with a bow and arrow yelling "I am Robin Hood!" Even better, no one seems to mind that I do.

Chris C: I once had a Scout leap on top of my head and then pepper my face with his Scattergun. *While staying on my head.* This type of player talent permeates *TF2*. It's like the Super Bowl of multiplayer shooters. But man, I really, *really* hate Scouts. Damn their jiggly, double-jumping legs.

Evan: With all my mind and body, I do too. But the relationships between characters—the way they interact and the mechanics and teamwork that arise from that—represents such a mastery of design by Valve. *TF2* is a zany food chain—Medics heal Heavies who are vulnerable to Snipers who are countered by Spies who avoid Pyros who hate Scouts who die easily to most Soldiers who hate Demomen at long range. Engineers get everybody to the party and hold down the 2fort.

2 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

Release: 2011

Chris C: *Skyrim* is a role-player's paradise. My current character is kind of insane, and loves punishing NPCs. One time, Lydia wandered in front of my perfectly aimed fireball. I then lead her to the top of High Hrothgar and dragon-shouted her off a cliff for her indiscretions. Erik's post-battle comments irritated me, so I armed him with a spoon and abandoned him in a wolf cave. Stating you can do anything you want in other games is hyperbole. In *Skyrim*, it's truth.

Evan: I love the way *Skyrim* feels like a collaboration in immersion between me and the world. I decided that bandits killed my character's parents, so I hunted them mercilessly for hours. As an archer/tracker, I decided that she'd cultivated a Native American's reverence for wildlife—only killing when absolutely necessary. I also started collecting books on hunting, then I took a day "vacation" from adventuring to read them. Superstitious, she hated enchanted weapons, too; I'd find a terrifying, high-level frost bow and just leave it in a cave. Simply walking instead of fast-traveling made *Skyrim*'s courier quests into real, personal adventures. Maintaining that persona took a lot of restraint, but it's the most ownership I've ever felt over a character.

Nathan: Gamers are even madly in love with *Skyrim*'s flaws. Silly repeated dialog about arrows and knees? Now it's the internet's favorite videogame meme since *Portal*'s, well, everything. And who doesn't love robbing people blind with the help of a trusty basket accomplice? *Skyrim*'s living, breathing world generates its own personality both inside and outside the game. To call it "generic fantasy" is to miss the point entirely.

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7 Portal

Release: 2007

Evan: Gaming's best-ever vignette. Subtle, contained, restrained, and pure in its execution.

Tyler: Many games can be described as having "innovative puzzles," but *Portal*'s clever mechanics aren't the crux of its greatness. It exploits the unique qualities of interactive media to tell a perfectly-paced story with an original aesthetic and a nuanced mix of humor and gravity. That's what sets it apart.

Chris A: Calling it perfect in every way is almost clichéd at this point, but it very much is. Personally, I love it for proving that not every great game has to be six to 60 hours. I used to go home after a hard day's work and watch *Goodfellas* twice a year. Now I replay *Portal*.

Tyler: We bonded over mutual compassion for a virtual inanimate cube. Few other games have so potently invaded the public consciousness.

Tim Edwards: Solve puzzles by making holes in stuff and walking through them. *Bwoop.* There's a hole. *Bwoop*. There's another. A thousand *bwoops* later, and there's a hole in your heart. It may only be a few hours long, but it's charming, delightful and adorable.

Rich McCormick: I hate puzzles, they make me feel stupid. *Portal* made me feel clever, even when I was being secretly stupid. Whatever infernal machine generates Valve's puzzle rooms, let's hope it stays friendly to humanity for a good long while.

Logan: A clever puzzle game takes you from giddy delight to unsettling paranoia to a battle of wills against a fiendish intelligence that isn't above the occasional low blow. It turned cake into a meme and made a superstar out of a cube. And it did it all in less than six hours and with one speaking part. Have you heard the expression "art is subtraction?" Maybe games are too.

REVIEWS

Some of the most engaging, moving story moments I've ever played.

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A NEW SCOPE

You'll laugh, you'll cry—**STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC** is a deep, complex world you want to live in ***by Josh Augustine***

Thirty minutes had passed since my insectoid ally had asked me. It was a simple question—did I intend to resist his claim to this land?—made complicated by the previous eight hours of politics, betrayal, and war. I didn't know what to do. I had to choose, so after consulting five people (including my wife over the phone), I reluctantly made my selection on the familiar BioWare dialog wheel and betrayed my always-faithful insectoid allies to defend a man who'd just slain his wife to prove his loyalty. I felt used.

I immediately wanted to load a quicksave and reverse my decision, but I couldn't—unlike BioWare's library of other RPGs, *The Old Republic* is an MMO and everything you do here is permanent, with unavoidable consequences. An abandoned friend suffers his ineluctable fate; a rescued child remains grateful and secure. It's an unexpected tool that BioWare uses to leverage player emotion and create some of the most engaging, moving story moments I've ever played in an RPG—moments that are light-years beyond what we've seen in MMOs so far.

Note: This review is based on our impressions from our first 85 hours in the game as an Imperial Agent who reached level 35. Some endgame elements were not ready to be evaluated at the time of this review, but as always, we will follow-up this review with constant and regular updates of our impressions as the game progresses in both this magazine and at www.pcgamer.com. **LD**

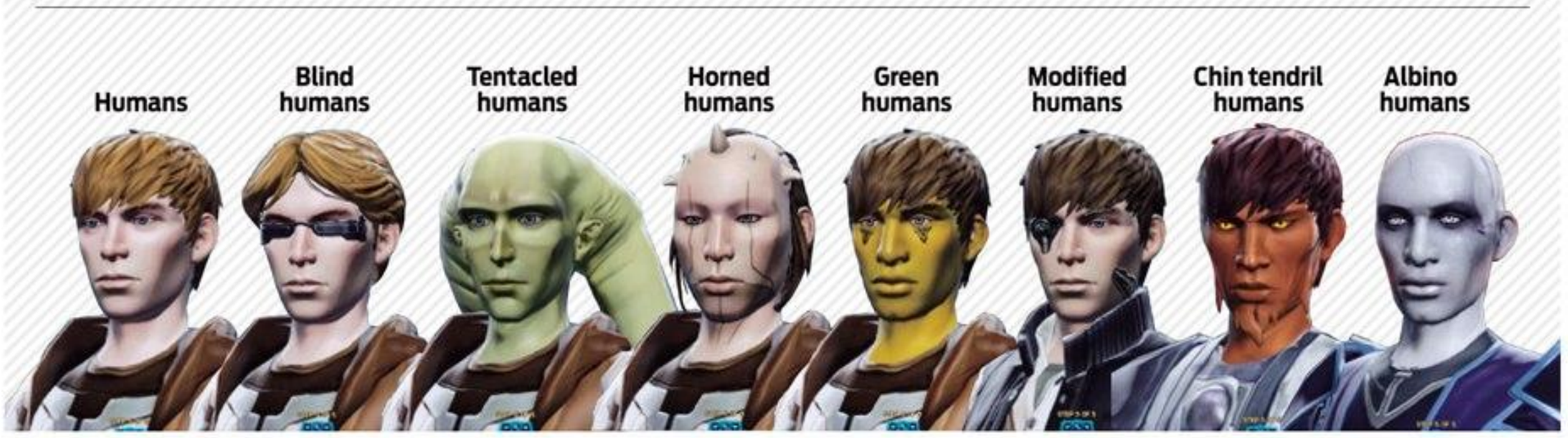
A galaxy far, far away

All 17 of the game's worlds are brought to life with evocative architecture, meticulous set design, and a convincing population. Many quest hubs are the size of small cities with over a hundred soldiers, merchants, doctors, civvies, and the rest going about their business inside. While most of these tertiary characters stay in a single location (we aren't talking *Skyrim* here), they're almost always acting out a scene—a Jawa trying to protect his droids from harassers at a starport, soldiers training with a drill sergeant, or a woman receiving saddening news from a friend—and they make destinations feel like places with both a deep past and a future. There is some repetition of environmental models and building layouts, but it's wisely kept to a minimum.

TOR is a BioWare RPG through and through, so you'll be doing the standard BioWare RPG stuff: gathering a crew, meeting interesting people, making moral choices, killing stuff, and upgrading gear. Combat relies on the traditional trinity setup, so you focus on healing, tanking, or DPS (damage per second) as one of the eight advanced classes available to each faction. A few class designs do break the mold, such as ranged and stealth tanks, but most fall into traditional archetypes. The pool of playable species, however, is miniscule—you'll be disappointed if you wanted a freaky-looking alien.

I liked the game's graphics style—very reminiscent of the *Knights of the Old Republic* series—though the light-hearted look won't be to everyone's tastes. I think BioWare's bet was a sound one, and there will be plenty of folks happy to trade in their bows and arrows for blaster rifles. The sci-fi setting is put to terrific use in the game's consistently dazzling animations and spell effects. The gold sparkles of fantasy game healing spells are replaced by my Agent's floating probes which rotate around, spraying him with healing kolto fluid. Blown grenades send enemies sprawling over railings. When I stab enemies with my electrified dagger, it actually sticks in their chests as their bodies helplessly convulse and crackle with electricity. And, of course, every blaster blast and saber swing is enhanced with the familiar sound effects and music that the official license grants to *TOR*.

Brother from another mother Side-by-side look at *TOR*'s playable species



Something borrowed

Not so fresh are the game's quest mechanics, which are rudimentary and mostly drawn from the oldest tricks in the book: kill X, use Y, or talk to Z. In my 85 hours spent on launch servers, I didn't encounter a single vehicle or transformation mechanic that mixed up the abilities I had at my disposal. A few riddle dialog quests popped up, but nothing revolutionary. That said, the novel Bonus Objective system, which usually makes the "kill X" portions of quests optional, does a fine job of breaking out grinding and making it a separate choice. It lets those that don't care to commit genocide on a regular basis stay focused on the story content, which is told through consistently entertaining cutscenes and enlivened with the memorable, nuanced characters we've come to expect from BioWare. Most everything in *TOR* is voiced, and the voice-overs are with rare exception, top-notch. Subtle touches, such as my Agent slipping in and out of accents while undercover or the slightly quavering tone of a psychotic doctor, both entertain and deepen the immersion into the stories.

What's more, you can actually provide permanent help to these people, unlike in most MMOs, thanks to *TOR*'s story areas. These seamless sections of the world are instanced for you and your group on the fly (no load screens), allowing everything inside to react, change, and/or explode in response to the choices you make. We've seen similar technology used in *World of Warcraft* and other MMOs to progressively alter an environment down a linear path that all players share, but BioWare uses it to custom-tailor the world for your character and his or her personal story. The difference is revolutionary: your choices matter, and will affect the world you and your friends play in forever.

My biggest concern going into *TOR* was that the focus on story-telling would restrict our ability to play with friends, but I was overjoyed (and quite surprised) to find that it wasn't a problem at all. I played on-and-off with my *aide-de-camp*, Gavin, for all 35 levels, and we never had a problem finding content to do together, including class quests. The ability to holo-call into groupmates' conversations (you show up as a translucent projection of yourself) is liberating, allowing you to adventure together without having to stumble about like conjoined twins.

It's an unscripted experience you can only have in *TOR*.

Opposing views

Josh and Gavin duke it out in the dialog system

But even though I could quest with Gavin, I wasn't sure I'd *want* to. Making moral choices by committee can be tricky for control freaks like me. When a conversation option pops up, everyone in your group selects the choice they want. Then a dice roll determines who gets to respond. The first time Gavin's evil Sith butchered someone begging for mercy, I was outraged. How could he? I felt invested in and protective of my softy Sith Agent, and Gavin *ruined my story*.

But, on second, calmer thought, I realized I was just playing a *different* story: the story of an unlikely group working together to defeat a common enemy. It's a very *Star Wars* theme, and, much like the inability to load quick saves, adds a depth and dimension to roleplaying. There'd be a similar difference between playing *Dungeons & Dragons* by yourself and with a full group of friends. Sure, another player will inevitably piss you off by randomly grabbing an NPC and hurling them into a fire, but that's part of the spontaneity that makes roleplaying in a group so great. It's an awesome, unscripted RPG experience that you can only have in *The Old Republic* right now.

Keeping it casual

Spurred on by the unexpected narrative I was experiencing with Gavin, I decided to try grouping with random players. Heroic quests are exactly what commitment-shy gamers like myself need to get grouping: open-world story areas along your questing route with tough enemies that two to four players can knock out in 15 minutes. They're prevalent on every planet, very casual, and non-threatening. They're the MMO equivalent of asking someone to join you and your buddies for drinks after work. *Hey bro, wanna come hack a few droid terminals with us?* I grouped up while leveling more often in *TOR* than I have in any other MMO I've ever played—by a very large margin—and it was always by choice.

Groups looking for challenges with more bite have Flashpoints, *TOR*'s four-person instanced dungeons. Their difficulty ramps up as you level, and high-level Flashpoints have complicated fights that are very challenging, even for coordinated groups. Thankfully, the penalty for death throughout *TOR* is next to nothing: players can self-resurrect wherever they died with no corpse run and a 10-second period of unbreakable stealth to move away from what killed 'em.

The only major hindrance to teamwork is the very noticeable lack of a looking-for-group tool. A very limited attempt can be found in the social menu, but it's so worthless that it's borderline insulting.

Your story

In MMOs, we usually travel around the world playing through the stories

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RIP Porkins, you crazy fool.

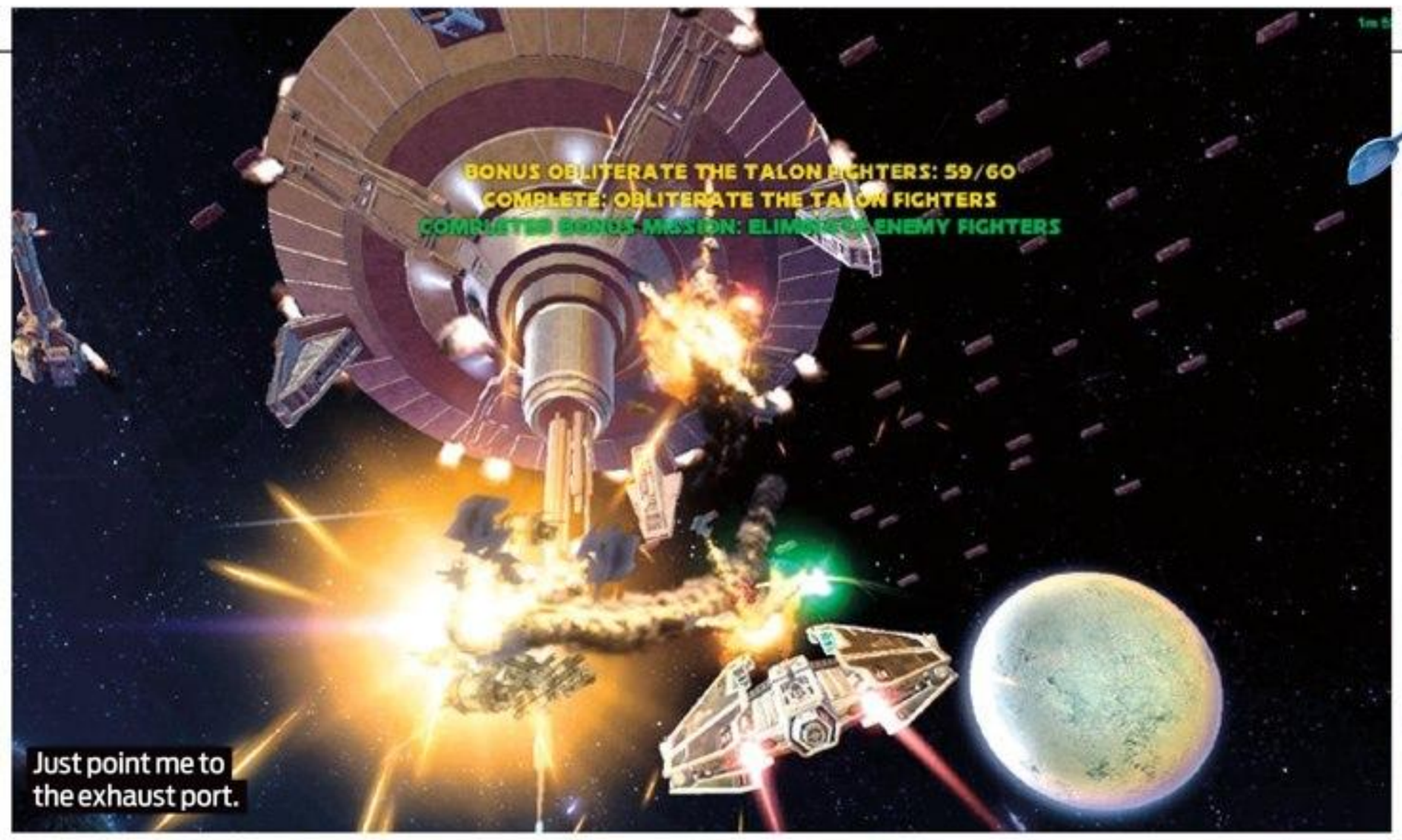
You, me, staring contest. Right now.

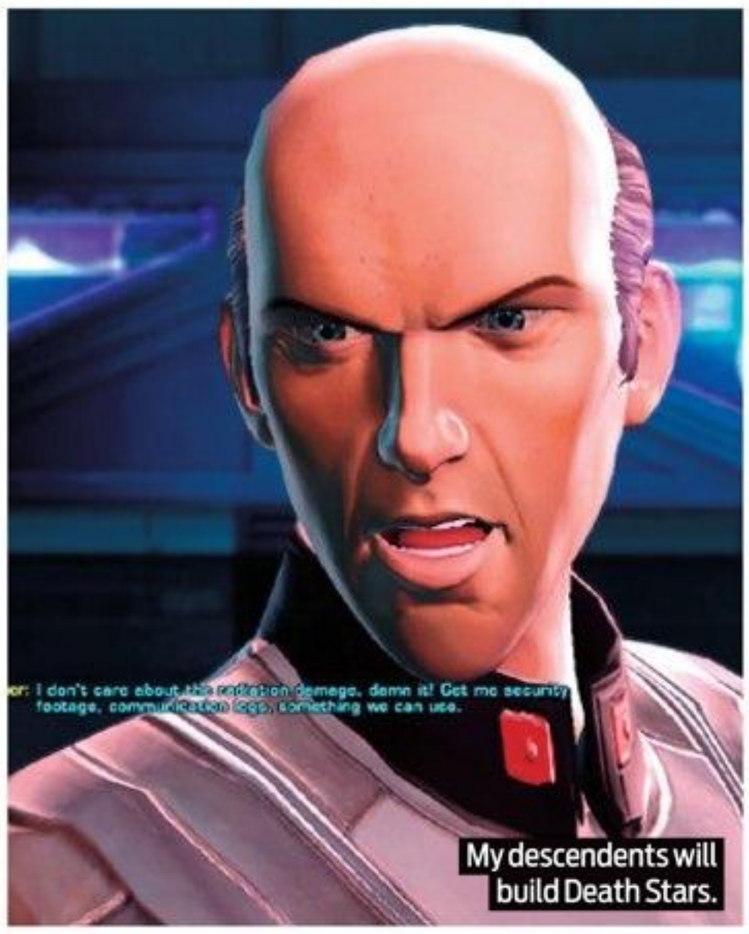
I've got enough lightning to share with everyone.

The Sith's retirement plan is simple: die.

Your companion distracts 'em while you slash 'em.

Nerous: Remember, y happened. The fabled tri-mohawk gets all the space ladies.





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of other people. Quests revolve around the problems and desires of quest-givers because our characters don't have any (other than the insatiable desire for XP). But you have a story in *TOR* and all of your adventures revolve around it: you go places because *you* have business to take care of there. It may seem like a modest shift, but being the center of the universe in a personalized, branching narrative weaves a strong sense of meaning and purpose into everything you do in the game.

I played my Imperial Agent as a champion of the people—someone who signed up for military duty to protect the innocent of the Empire from enemy attacks. And it worked well, for a while. I picked all the obvious light-side options. I used cool tech like spinal-implanted holoprojectors that disguised me as a droid to infiltrate terrorist cells and save lives. But as the story went on, I began to find out that the world of an Imperial Agent is not so black-and-white. My enemies were constantly changing, and they weren't always the people I assumed them to be.

Without spoiling plot details, I'll just say that I was very impressed by the overarching story *TOR* empowered me to create: one of a naïve agent trying to do the right thing in an Empire filled with both evil and noble people. Around level 15, I even turned down a perfectly good quest because I thought my character would have refused it (an MMO first for me!). My character had gotten sick of being told to exterminate the native populations every time he arrived on a planet, and he started to wonder if he was the bad guy. The story evolved almost perfectly with my own narrative—it was on that same planet that BioWare tested my resolve by putting me in the situation described at the start of this review: the same native population that I'd championed now demanded the blood of a betrayed man trying to redeem his family.

A few people are going to want a say in what you do in that big story of yours. Namely, the members of the crew that you assemble while playing. *TOR*'s companion system lets you have one crew member out fighting with you at any time, and all of them can be customized with new gear and appearance options. This may not be new for BioWare RPGs, but it's one of the most innovative and successful elements of *TOR* as an MMO, providing you with an ever-present audience that reacts to and reflects your choices, via dialog and affection/romance options.

Each class recruits different companions, each with their own unique quirk and backstory. As a level 35 Imperial Agent, I've gathered a violent anarchist, a groveling robot, a diplomat who's merged with the hive mind of an insectoid species, and a doctor who can transform into a space werewolf at will.

Crew skills are the game's crafting system, and provide the usual activities: gather materials and use them to build weapons, armor, and consumables—with a few added twists. Gathering professions also allow you to send companions on missions, which removes access to that companion for 5-20 minutes and gives them a chance to return with crafting materials, credits, light-side and dark points, new recipes, and skill points. It's a decent system for people who don't want to spend the time gathering and crafting themselves, but it can get fairly annoying to have to continually send companions on new missions every few minutes—there should be an automated option.

The little things

It wasn't until I discovered that you could reverse-engineer items in *TOR* that I began to really get drawn into the crafting system. Suddenly, there was a whole complement of unlisted recipes out there for me to work toward. It's a rarely-used concept that's expertly implemented to give crafters another way to hone in on the specific areas they want to specialize in.

Another wonderful surprise I unearthed while item-tinkering was moddable gear: select weapons and armor with stats fully determined by the modification items dropped into them. Once you find moddable gear with a look you like (or a helmet that changes your voice in a cool way), you can conceivably keep it forever, tossing in new modifications to boost the stats as you level up.

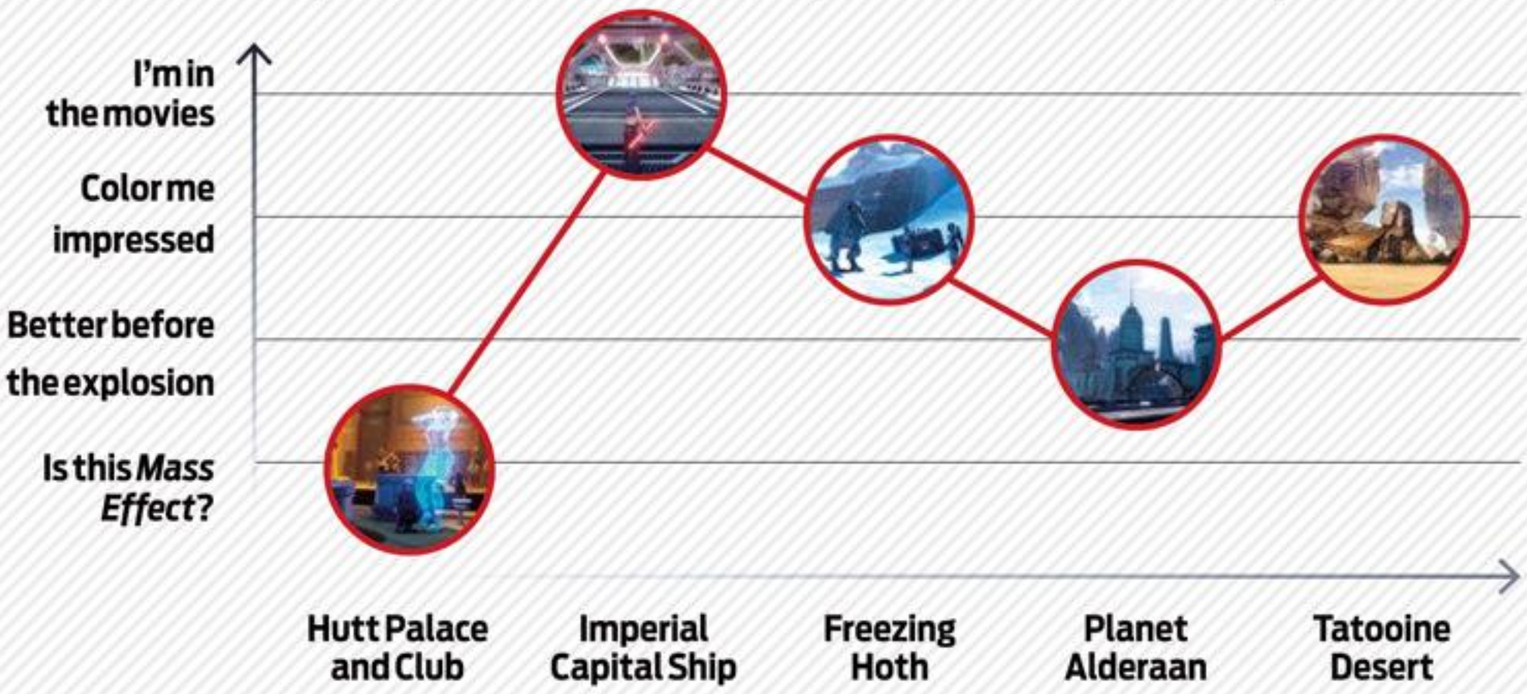
It's a great system that helps you establish a unique look in the universe, and its interface is very well designed. The only problem I had was trying to figure out which stats were best for my character. Ambiguously named stats like Surge aren't explained, and I had to go digging through sub-menus in my character pane to even get a hint at what they offered me.

TOR is full of clever new approaches and tweaks to long-standing MMO features. The auction house automatically suggests buyout prices to undercut the lowest seller; datacrons are nestled on every planet, offering small permanent stat boosts; and there's a full codex stuffed with lore, backstories, and interesting info for the knowledge-seeker. The only major disappoint-

Customize companions with gear and appearance options.

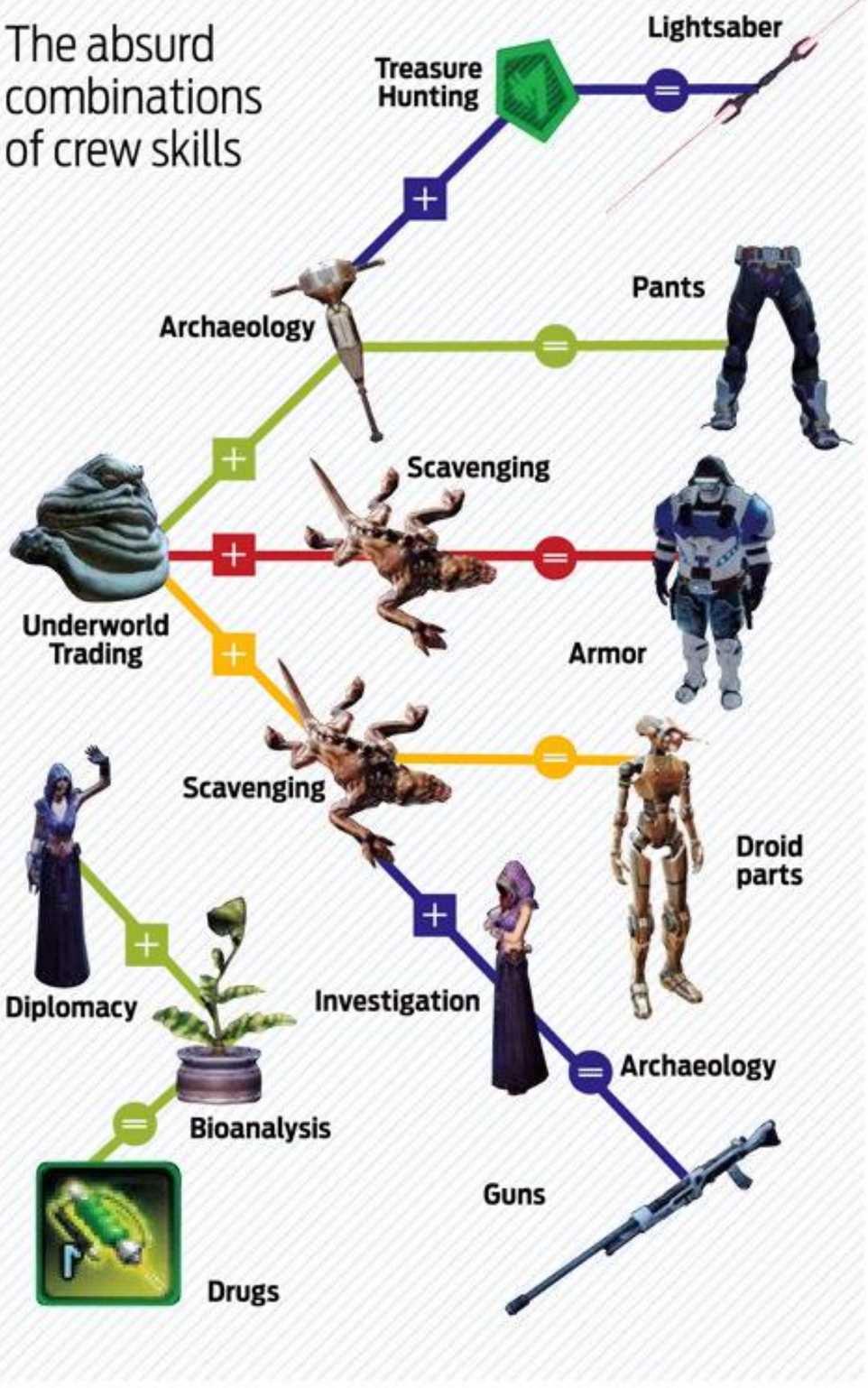
Nostalgia world tour

How *The Old Republic*'s locations stand up to their movie counterparts



Crafting Oddities

The absurd combinations of crew skills



ment on this front were achievements, which appear as tiny, uninspired codex entries—a hastily-built afterthought.

Shooting up the place

Where *The Old Republic* makes the flimsiest attempt to break the mold is in its combat design: a very traditional click-to-activate ability system that borrows heavily from the big MMOs of recent years. It's enjoyable enough to play with, and has a few nuances, but will ultimately leave MMO vets with a sense of déjà vu at a time when most are eagerly looking for something different.

The 16 advanced classes do, however, offer a strong breadth of playstyles, ranging from ruthless Sith to tricky Smugglers. Skill trees are very different from one another, but there's almost zero room for customization within each, so you won't be able to experiment much after you settle on one.

Around level 15, you gain command of your own starship, which matches the style of your class, and are free to cruise around the galaxy. You can march imperiously around your ship like you can in *Mass Effect*, but alas, your ship is tiny and there are only a few interactive spots.

Your ship can shoot in any of the dozen or so space combat missions drizzled around the galaxy map. In each, your ship proceeds along a fixed path as you use your mouse to target enemy fighters and battlements on enemy capital ships and take a few minutes to complete. Ship combat is a pleasant diversion that breaks up your questing, but it's definitely not why I'd recommend *TOR*.

Likewise, I'm lukewarm about the PvP elements, at least at early levels. I've played the three instanced PvP WarZones 25 times, and most matches had a very broad range of players (anywhere between levels 12 and 50). Almost without exception, the highest level players—who have the most skills and skill points at their disposal—dominated. The measures put in place to balance incongruous player power do help at higher levels, but it's rough early on.

These annoying balance issues will hopefully be alleviated at 50, or when more players are made available to the match-making tool—either by BioWare deciding to implement cross-server sign-ups or simply after people stop questing 24/7—allowing the game to force tighter level brackets. The WarZones house some fun gameplay (especially Huttball, a twisted version of soccer with flame pits, acid pools, and death) and it'd be a shame if you had to avoid them until max level to find a fair fight.

The game's designated open-world PvP zones look extremely promising. Particularly the endgame planet Ilum, whose expansive, intricate battlefield filled with war machines and giant turrets is entertaining even without other players in it. They're currently ghost towns as players focus on leveling, but I hope that the zones live up to their potential to serve as bloody hangouts for PvP fans like myself.

BioWare hit a big homerun on server stability. I didn't hear of a single server crash in the first week, and the constant addition of new servers kept queue times reasonable. Inside the game, things were a bit creakier. My client never crashed, but the typical MMO bugs showed up to cause problems, like a few broken quests, unusable gathering nodes, and UI glitches. I only saw reports of one game-breaking bug, but it was fixed on launch day.

Into the future

A lot of questions remain for *The Old Republic*, particularly regarding the endgame. We know that hard-mode Flashpoints, raids, and PvP areas await us at max level, but we don't know if they'll prove interesting enough to keep our attention for the long-term. If the endgame consists of gear-grinding and standard raid encounters, it'll have a very jarring effect on those who loved playing through stories for the previous 200 hours. I'm also concerned that the need to record new voice-over for every bit of new dialog will slow down production of content updates and make the team more likely to focus on raid content post-launch.

But that's all speculation for now. What I know for certain is that it takes close to 200 hours to level a character to 50, and there are *eight* different class stories that I intend to play through. There's a ridiculous amount of content in *The Old Republic*. The game's quality is consistently outstanding and, if you enjoy RPGs at all, the price tag is easily justified—even if you never step foot past max-level.

The Old Republic plunges players into the Star Wars universe we've always wanted to live in, and succeeds as both and RPG and an MMO. And perhaps just as thrilling, there's an oversized Bantha's worth of potential in expanding areas like space combat and the companion system, or in adding new features like guild housing. This one's got a long, bright future ahead of it. ■

The battlefield is entertaining even without other players.

◆ **Price** $60 plus $15/month subscription ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** EA
◆ **Developer** BioWare ◆ **Multiplayer** Massively ◆ **Link** www.swtor.com ◆ **ESRB** T

VERDICT

An achievement as an RPG and an MMO, *The Old Republic* offers something bold and new for gamers.

PC GAMER 93

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Lighstabers: so powerful they cut screenshots.
Valethia
Flygirl Yogitus
<Coconut Monkeys>
271
[Heroic Area]
Sundari Fleclands
Belmorran Arms Mocorpo
23
19
Q W R T Y Mouse 1 2 3 5 6
A Z X C V B N 7 8 9 +

That's what you get for making "horny" jokes.

Let the wookiee set you on fire.
282

[Guild] [Juggernaut]: yup
[Guild] [Krill]: surprise!
[Guild] [Larrdarr]: im on belmorre lol
[Guild] [Wrenz]: nar shadda. sorry to dissapoint
[Guild] [Aressa]: who told him??
[Guild] [Megalovirus]: I think that knee joke has got to be one of the most overused in history of gaming. :)
[Guild] [Kayleb]: SURPRISE!
You gain 1628 experience.
Nereus the Revanite
<Coconut Monkeys>
Arthenean Heraldak, Grand Champion of the Great Hunt
<Coconut Monkeys>
Not Ready Yet
62
Ah, the refreshing splash of kolto from tiny droids.
Release a Camp Crash Thranta
Inheritance
Travel to Drommund Kaas
The Head That Wears the Crown
Recover the Lost Crown
Ulgo's Revenge
Intercept the Evidence Drop-off
[FLASHPOINT] Mandalorian Raiders
Defeat the Mandalorian Beastmaster
[GROUP] Flashpoint: Mandalorian Raiders
Complete Flashpoint: Mandalorian Raiders
Brexx the Bloodhound
Mandalorian Beastmaster
Level 24 Boss
HP: 30308/33350
31
24
YOGITUS
SANGUINE GALKY HOUND

Valethia
Maybe he's just lonely?

She's got one gun for each of you.

THREE-PEAT

TRINE 2 is pretty enough to blind you to the lack of true innovations *by Jon Blyth*

Need to know

What is it?
A fairy-tale physics puzzle-platformer.

Influenced by
Lost Vikings

Play it on
2GHz dual-core CPU, 1GB RAM, GeForce 8800 or above

Alternatively
Braid (92%)

DRM
Steam; DRM-free version coming in 2012

Trine 2 is more "radical cosmetic surgery" than sequel: Frozenbyte has exploded the *Trine* formula into a beautiful, rainbow-soaked spectacle. You don't realize how few purplish-green crystal caverns there are until you're forced to stop and bask in one.

Trine 2 is a fairy-tale platforming adventure, based around a magical floating artifact that's bound together the souls of a wizard, a knight and a thief. The story is charming and a shade too earnest, but what really drives you (beyond the irresistible platformer instinct to travel to the right) is the satisfaction that's gained from the inventive physics-based puzzles.

Playing solo, you can swap between characters instantly as you utilize their different skills. The Wizard levitates objects and can conjure boxes (and eventually planks), allowing him to bridge gaps and create steps. But he's crap in a fight, so tap him out whenever goblins and bosses appear.

The Thief can fire a grappling hook and swing from wooden surfaces, and her bow makes her the best ranged fighter. Then there's the Warrior, who dishes out meaty melee wounds with his sword, deflects lava with his shield, and smashes delicate structures from afar with his hammer.

Three's company

If you've played the first game, you're probably thinking "this sounds pretty familiar. Shouldn't you be focusing on the new stuff?" The weakest thing about *Trine 2* is how broadly identical it is to the first game. The energy bar is gone, and there's online co-op, but otherwise *Trine 2* amounts to a skill reset and a bunch of gorgeous new levels.

Multiplayer does change the nature of the game. First off, it's nice to solve a puzzle with a friend. The first *Trine* had local multiplayer which was bizarrely hidden in a sub-sub-menu; *Trine 2* brings it to the front and adds online matchmaking and text chat. It's a cinch to drop into a game with strangers or pals.

More fundamentally, having three players with their powers divided, instead of one player swapping between the powers as he sees fit, means that progress that could only previously be made by one of the characters now has to be accessible for all three. Frozenbyte has addressed this in two separate ways. The first solution was to buff the Wizard: he can now levitate items that he's standing on or eventually lift enemies and hurl them around—he's definitely the most useful character throughout the game.

A preferable and more elegant solution is Unlimited mode. Tucked away in the "host a game" options, it allows multiples of each class to be onscreen at any time. It's more chaotic, more flexible, and more fun, favoring enjoyment over perfect symmetry. For example, the Thief can be a spare wheel in many situations; Wizards can just avoid a boss fight, instead hanging out by the partner-regenerating checkpoints while an endless stream of Thieves and Knights dispense with a boss. (A reprehensibly cheap tactic, and one that works wonderfully.)

Trine 2 may retread a lot of old ground, but it's gone through puberty and blossomed into a real beauty, while fixing many of the first game's problems. It's as if Frozenbyte is saying "Oh, did we make *Trine*? We meant this." It's got the same moderate puzzling challenge, the same characters, the same charm, the exact same feel. ■

◆ **Price** $15 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Atlus ◆ **Developer** Frozenbyte
◆ **Multiplayer** 3-player co-op ◆ **Link** www.trine2.com ◆ **ESRB** E

VERDICT

Far from mold-breaking, but all the edges have been smoothed out. Great for fans of the first, but best for newcomers.

PC GAMER 82

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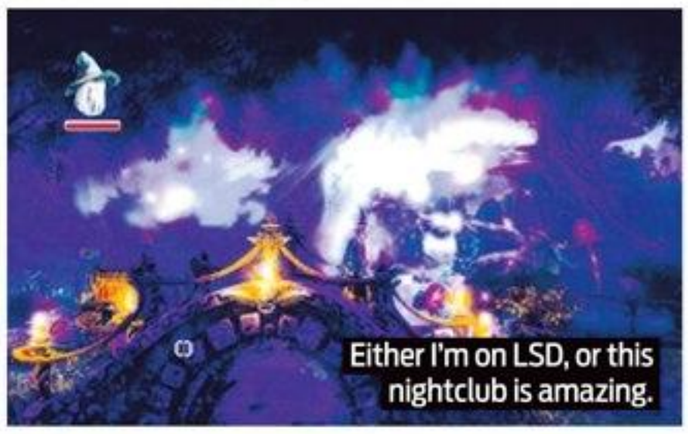
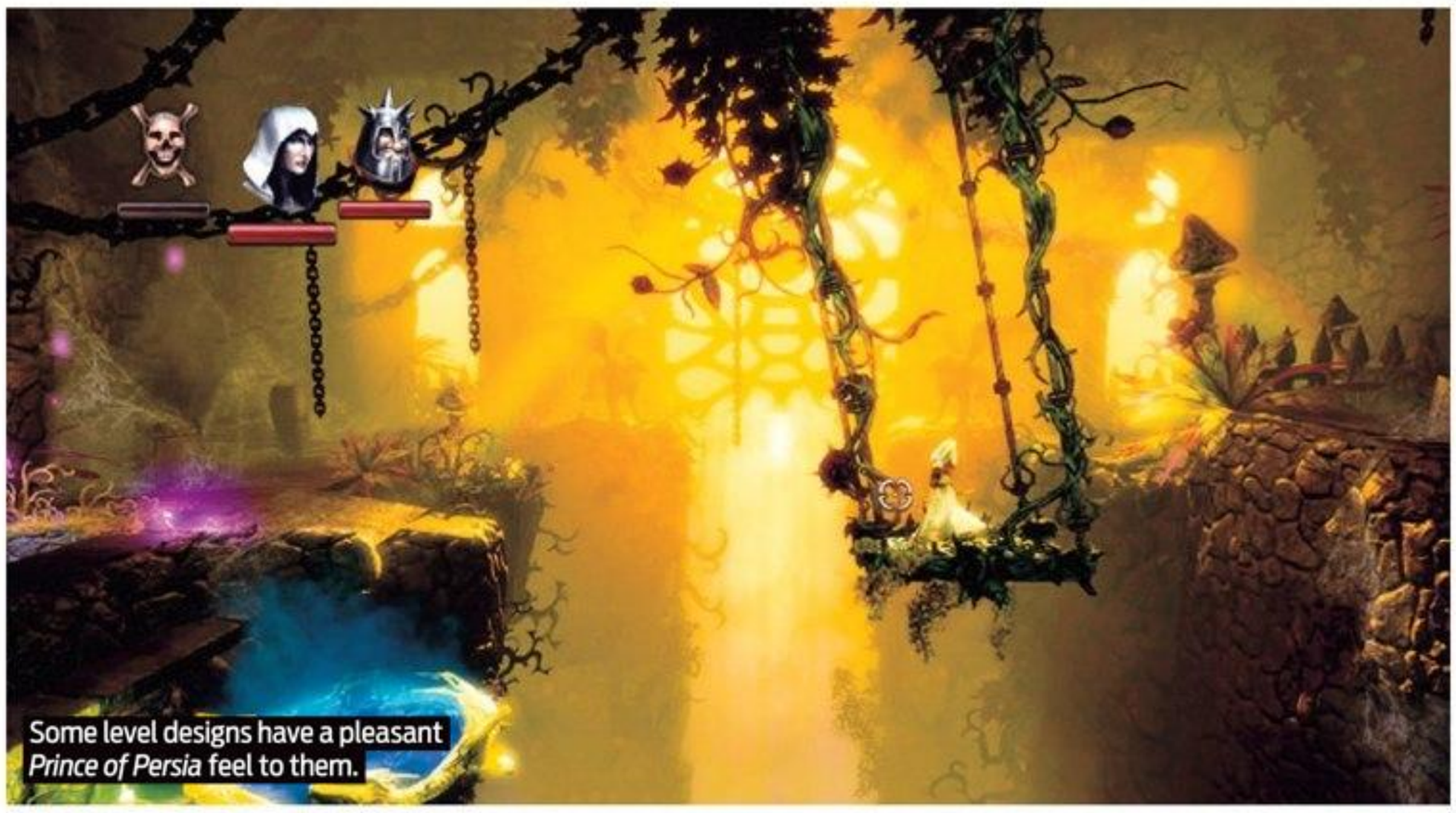
Release the vulnerable-to-puzzle-solutions Kraken!

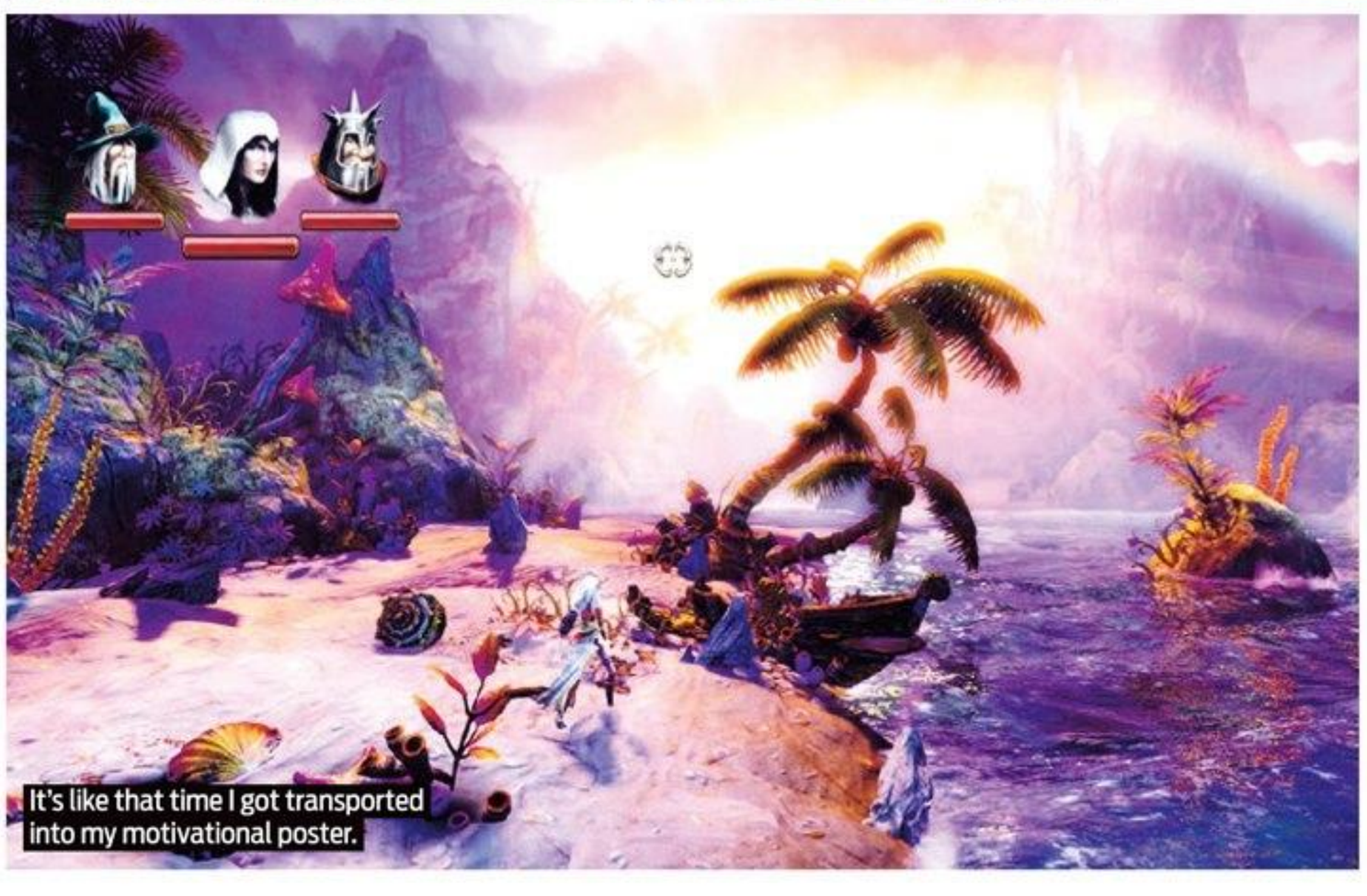


Either I'm on LSD, or this nightclub is amazing.

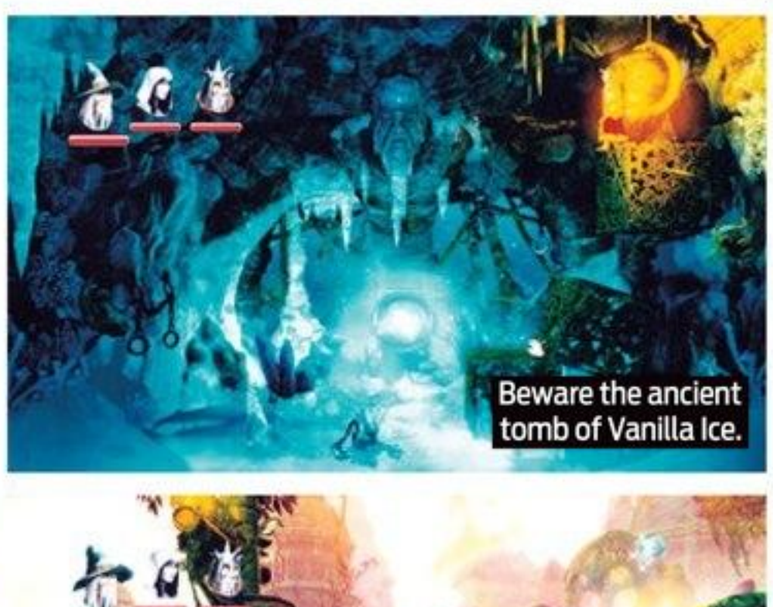


Some level designs have a pleasant *Prince of Persia* feel to them.

The bloom effects are, at times, excessive.



It's like that time I got transported into my motivational poster.



Beware the ancient tomb of Vanilla Ice.

Platforming backgrounds this gorgeous are hard to come by.

REPLICATED

APB RELOADED resurrects Realtime Worlds' ambitious city MMO as a free-to-play game. Was the operation successful? ***by Rich McCormick***

Need to know

What is it?
Free-to-play MMO set in an open city. Players choose either enforcer or criminal, and try to complete missions with opposition interference.

Influenced by
Grand Theft Auto, World of Warcraft

Play it on
Core 2 Duo, 4GB RAM, Geforce 8800 or above.

Alternatively
GTA IV: The Ballad of Gay Tony (89%)

Copy protection
Online activation, Punkbuster

Not revamped, not redesigned, but reloaded. *APB*'s new suffix is relevant, as the free-to-play reincarnation of 2010's deflated cops-and-robbers MMO is a retread of the same ground. Same drab city, same hollow combat, same lopsided results.

APB's problems were legion, and little has changed. Free-to-play publisher GamersFirst has left the original game's city of San Paro standing, an edifice to badly-judged level design and the color grey. Developer Realtime Worlds created the place to live and breathe; instead, it sputtered a few times before its life support failed. Its resurrection is a miserable one, the emaciated city just as pallid as before.

San Paro's biggest problem is city planning. *APB Reloaded*'s missions usually pit two squads of human-controlled criminals and enforcers against each other, asking them to perform a multi-stage series of mini-jobs. One team has to drive to a place, collect a thing, and deliver it elsewhere; the other team has to stop them. Occasionally, this makes for the moments that *APB Reloaded* ought to constantly deliver: high-speed chases through bustling streets, or last-second jumps into getaway cars. These *do* happen more regularly than before, but they're little more than adrenaline shocks to punctuate the hours spent bumbling around between jobs.

Empty clip

More often than not, completing a mission is like beating your head against one of San Paro's flat, grey concrete walls. Both sides have mission locations marked on their HUDs, and they're invariably overlooked by high ground. The players who occupy that ground first win almost every time, with free reign to pop anyone who comes close. Most missions end after 10 minutes of screaming frustration. San Paro's so full of hiding spots and convenient vantage points that it's exponentially easier to stop someone else's mission—since you can put their goal under lockdown—than it is to complete your own.

Urban renovation doesn't seem to have been high on GamersFirst's list of priorities—*APB* had the same spatial problems, and the same tire-some missions. The new developers have instead plugged their attention into the game's economy. *Reloaded* is free-to-play, supported by item sales and a premium semi-subscription option. Steer clear of the latter, and you'll get obnoxious reminders telling you what you could've earned in experience points and in-game currency, if only you had ponied up the cash.

When it comes to the cash shop, you've definitely got options. Top-tier cars clock in at around $15, though you can score better wheels through repeat play and missions. Guns are cheaper—around five bucks—and can be rented on a monthly basis. Lifetime access is more expensive, but players wielding beefier weaponry have a notable advantage over cheapskates. Playing with the default Star 556, I was ineffectual even at the gun's optimal mid-range—but when I upgraded to a scoped-up AK-47 knock-off, I started mowing down enemies with ease. There's little connection between weapon and world, and there are still no head-shots; bullet barrages inexplicably kill some players in milliseconds, while others require multiple clips to drop.

Most of *APB*'s problems persist in *Reloaded*, with a nasty bonus: the game's currently riddled with cheaters. The original game was arguably killed too soon, and the switch to free-to-play means that curious cops and criminals can take *APB* for a test drive. But this is no revitalization—*Reloaded* is rehash, replication, and repetition. ■

◆ **Price** Free ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** GamersFirst ◆ **Developer** GamersFirst
◆ **Multiplayer** MMO only ◆ **Link** www.gamersfirst.com/apb

Making a monster

APB's detailed character creator in horrible action

VERDICT

Reloaded has recreated *APB*, but reined in its ambition. Most of the same problems are here, but for a better price.

PC GAMER 57

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Like many action-MMOs, *APB* can't decide if it's a shooter.

It's Dick Tracy, minus the coat.

Disrupting other players' missions is way easier than trying to complete your own.

An Enforcer apprehends our shirtless hero.

Camping the high ground is a shortcut to ending someone else's mission.

Reloaded's new cash shop got the most development attention.

TOMORROW'S WORLD

In **ANNO 2070**, the best way to predict the future is to build it ***by Chris Thursten***

Need to know

What is it?
City-building real time strategy with an innovative online component.

Influenced by
Anno 1404, Sim City

Play it on
2GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8400/Radeon HD 4350

Alternatively
Cities XL (75%)

Copy protection
CD key tied to Ubisoft account

If all the things to bring a civilization to a grinding halt, it'd have to be truffles. Fully half of my island is urbanized, with a workforce of thousands. My fisheries, oil refineries, pig farms and distilleries operate with total efficiency, surplus goods loaded into cargo haulers and sold at a premium to the hippies across the waves. I'm an industrial juggernaut, and yet I can grow no further. If I'm going to attract more engineers to my settlement, I need to meet a sudden and unexpected demand for lobster dinners.

Lobster, I have—but no truffles. Loading a ship with supplies, I establish a new colony, far across the sea. I build a port, a town, and truffle farms. Migrant workers toil day and night, loading fungi by the ton onto the ships that link them to a glittering metropolis they'll never see. I think I'm doing well.

In 2070, sea levels have risen, dividing territory into isolated islands that are colonized and exploited by independent contractors. The population, meanwhile, is split between smog-and-profit megacorporation Global Trust and the environmentalist Eden Initiative, with scientists from SAAT providing technology to both.

Clash of cartoons

Anno 2070 unfortunately squanders the topicality of its subject matter by establishing factions that are cartoonishly good and evil. Eden Initiative workers are soft-spoken and demand only tea, vegetables and a concert hall. Global Trust, meanwhile, fills its workers with booze, fast food and—I wish I were joking—aspirational television programs generated by the Ministry of Truth. It's incredibly ham-fisted: Eco-Jesus going up against Scrooge McDuck in Ayn Rand cosplay.

You'll work for both factions in single-player, frequently making choices about which to support. I found myself going with Global Trust to see what hilarious mishaps its terrible decision-making would inflict on the world—which, if nothing else, added a little life to the fairly drab campaign. You're led by the hand almost all of the way, as the game very slowly imparts the techniques that you'll need to succeed.

The single mission and free play modes are much more successful. At its heart, *Anno 2070* is a game of creative engineering: building a big, interconnected machine that looks like a city but purrs like an engine. While the basic principle—supply and demand—is as simple as they come, there's enough complexity that you're unlikely to ever feel totally in control. You're free to problem-solve as you see fit, answering demand for resources with trade, research, and expansion.

You're also constantly given additional objectives ranging from supplying certain goods to headhunting a certain number of glowing employees wandering the streets of your town. These side-missions keep the game moving and prevent you from ever staring at one aspect of it for too long. Should competition demand it, there's also combat: mostly naval, with aircraft and base defenses for spice. It's functional but far from the main event. Instead, the need for military protection adds an additional dimension to the core resource management game.

Playable and polished, *Anno 2070* is a steady improvement on what has come before. If anything, it plays it a little too safe, with innovations like online elections and undersea bases not really impacting the core. Worth your time, but lacking the resource to become a management great. ■

It's like Eco-Jesus going up against Scrooge McDuck in Ayn Rand cosplay.

◆ **Price** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Ubisoft ◆ **Developer** Blue Byte, Related Designs
◆ **Multiplayer** 8-player versus and co-op ◆ **Link** bit.ly/oJfvOV

VERDICT

A polished sim that doesn't quite push its big ideas far enough, and features a comically preachy campaign.

PC GAMER 80

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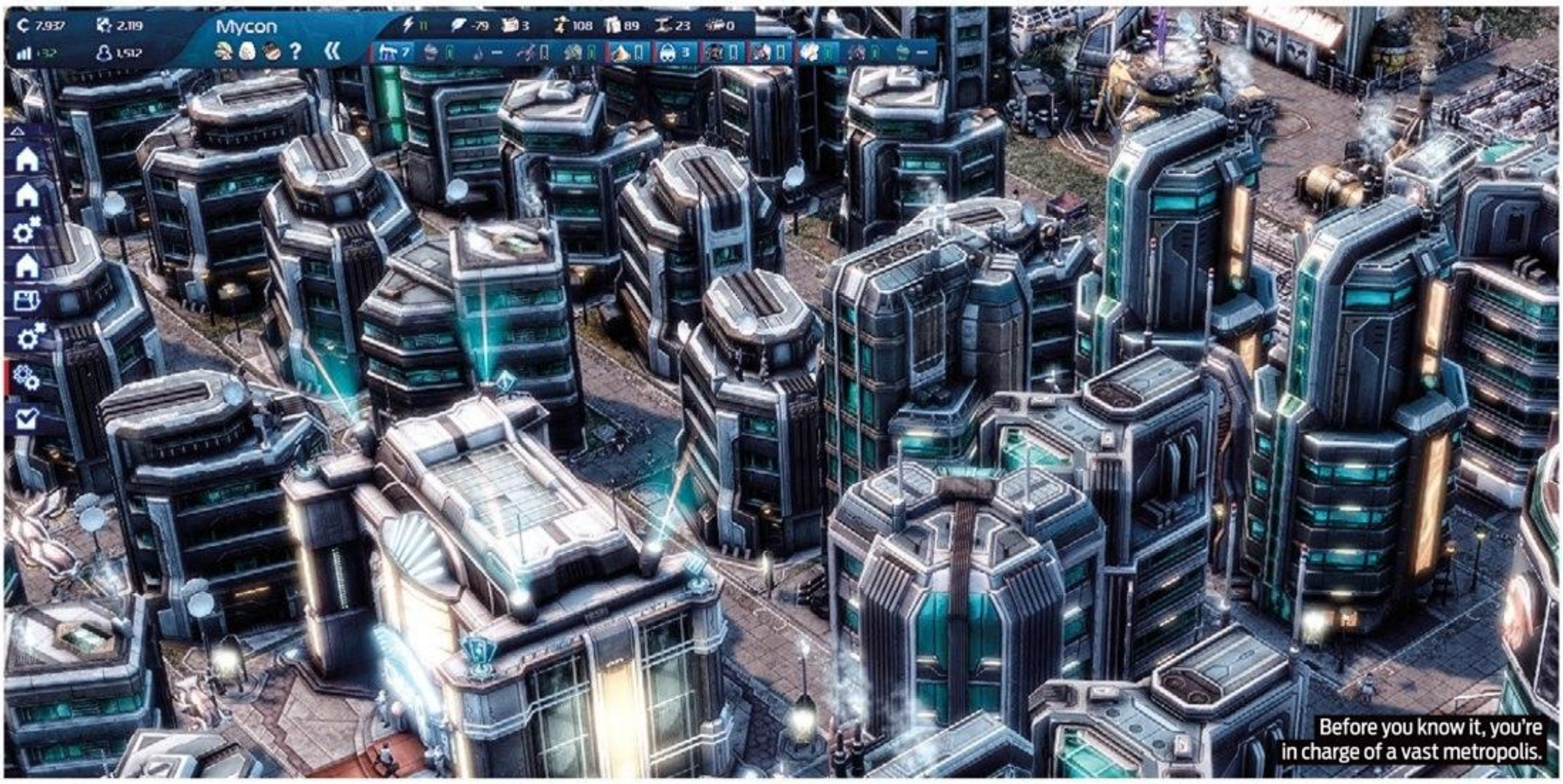
Deep-sea bases give access to unique resources.

Establish trade routes to fill resource gaps.

The future is metallic blue, apparently.



Before you know it, you're in charge of a vast metropolis.

Roaming merchants sell building materials and more.

They still haven't found Nemo.

An Eden Project village, busy being correct about everything.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

BATTLEFIELD 3: BACK TO KARKAND tests how much we'll pay for a slice of the past ***by Tom Senior***

Need to know

What is it?
Map pack adding four revamped *Battlefield 2* maps, 10 weapons and three vehicles.

Influenced by
Battlefield 2

Play it on
2Ghz dual-core CPU, GeForce 8600 GT/Radeon X1950, 2GB RAM

Alternatively
Battlefield Play4Free (71%)

Copy protection
Origin

The *Back to Karkand* expansion for *Battlefield 3* started a war inside my head. On one side, the cynic. On the other, the boy who likes shooting things. "$15 for four old maps, 10 old weapons and a few old vehicles?" The cynic scoffed. "Shut up!" the boy cried. "I just killed a tank by shooting a rocket through a hole in an apartment block!" It's an argument the cynic was never going to win.

The maps are fantastic. But they should be. Wake Island, Gulf of Oman, Sharqi Peninsula and Strike at Karkand are all *Battlefield 2* maps, rebuilt to make use of the destructibility and graphical loveliness of the Frostbite 2 engine. The four-year-old architecture has been tweaked and iterated upon countless times. They're finely honed, fair, and consistently produce great matches.

Strike at Karkand and Sharqi Peninsula provide the most memorable fights. Almost every building can be blown apart. The streets are dominated by rumbling tanks, but the nooks of narrow alleyways let assault fighters take the battle away from the monstrous vehicles. Gulf of Oman is also fantastic. Its tall buildings and leering cranes offer some creative vantage points for snipers and it's much more built up than the *Battlefield 2* original.

Old stomping grounds

The slender horseshoe of Wake Island is perhaps the weakest of the bunch, but still delivers a great spectacle. It's wide-open, narrow walkways and bridges are a nightmare for infantrymen who aren't inside a vehicle, and its weird shape and increased size makes it hard for fighters on one end to get around to the points on the other. It's a great hunting ground for pilots of the F-35, however. The V-TOL jet makes a return from *Battlefield 2*. It's much more sluggish than *Battlefield 3*'s jets, but the ability to hover like a bird of prey and pick off infantry make it a devastating and especially satisfying weapon.

The maps are top notch, but the $15 price tag is still troubling. At almost half the price of the base game (which is required to play *Karkand*), we should expect a little more than a few remastered classics. *Bad Company 2*'s Vietnam pack succeeded because it took us into a different place where the weapons were rustier and the warfare dirtier. *Back to Karkand* gives us more *Battlefield 3*, with the same highs and lows attached (Battlelog is still frustrating: long load times and disconnections are typical).

Only two of *Battlefield 3*'s original maps delivered the full, sprawling warfare experience: jets flying overhead as tanks dueled below. The four new maps added by *Back to Karkand* show *Battlefield 3* at its biggest and best. It's strange that DICE had to reach into familiarity to really show what *Battlefield 3* can do, but there's no denying *Back to Karkand*'s quality. ■

◆ **Price** $15, or free if you pre-ordered ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Electronic Arts ◆ **Developer** DICE ◆ **Multiplayer** Up to 64 players ◆ **Link** http://bit.ly/ueh5ks

VERDICT

These four fantastic maps are pricey, but they're more than just a nostalgic throwback. They present *Battlefield 3* at its best.

PC GAMER **84**

Find more issues at magazinesdownload.com

SPELUNKIER

An underground hit about underground hitting gets an HD upgrade with **CAVE STORY+** *by Chris Donlan*

Over on a *Cave Story* message board, user X-Caliber has a problem with *Cave Story+*. It's to do with Balrog, a recurring boss who resembles a suitcase. In the old days, his catchphrase was "Huzzah!" But thanks to the HD upgrade's alternate translation, it's changed to "Oh yeah!" Cool beans to you and I, perhaps, but X-Caliber is livid.

If you're wondering how a game could ever inspire the levels of devotion needed to power criticism of this granularity, you probably haven't played *Cave Story*. You really should, though—and, all controversies aside, *Cave Story+* is a good place to start. Nicalis may have instigated a contentious dehuzzahification of Daisuke Amaya's homebrew charmer, but it's also delivered a remixed soundtrack that's both perky and stirring, with new art that evolves the retro stylings of the original design without lapsing into over-cute indulgence.

It's the sensitive reworking *Cave Story* deserves. Studio Pixel's classic is a uniquely polite adventure that drops you into a subterranean world, where a villainous doctor threatens a group of bunny people. You save the day by exploring, shooting weird animals, fighting bosses, and collecting items that—more often than not—open up new parts of the environment, where the whole thing repeats itself (wonderfully).

Delightful derring-do

Cave Story's levels manage to be intricate without appearing confusing, and they retain a clear sense of forward momentum even as the storyline branches and the hidden Easter eggs pile up. Meanwhile, an orderly series of unlocks brings shape to the game's wayward narrative, and each new gadget you're handed genuinely broadens your options. You can double-jump with the use of special boots, for instance, or use the kickback from the machinegun to pogo your way from one ledge to the next.

There's a leveling system in place, but it focuses on your weapons rather than your character. Skillful players will be rewarded with more powerful attacks, while the careless will be punished through regular downgrades if they take too many risks. It's a reminder that, while *Cave Story*'s sugary on the surface, it's pleasantly tart underneath. Even before you turn to Nicalis' new bonus challenges (a boss rush, some pitiless platforming gauntlets, and the option to repeat the campaign with a different lead) seeing everything on your first playthrough is nigh impossible.

By the time you're considering that *second* playthrough, you'll have crossed over to the other side, joining the informal community of speed-runners, FAQ writers, and *Cave Story* cartographers who've fallen into this venerable chasm of wonders, never to emerge again. As a dear old friend of mine used to say, "Huzzah!" ■

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Nicalis ◆ **Developer** Nicalis, Studio Pixel
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.nicalis.com ◆ **ESRB** E

Need to know

What is it?
A retro-tinged platformer with great upgradable weapons

Influenced by
Metroid, Castlevania

Play it on
Dual-core 2.0GHz CPU, 512GB RAM

Alternatively
Aquaria (81%)

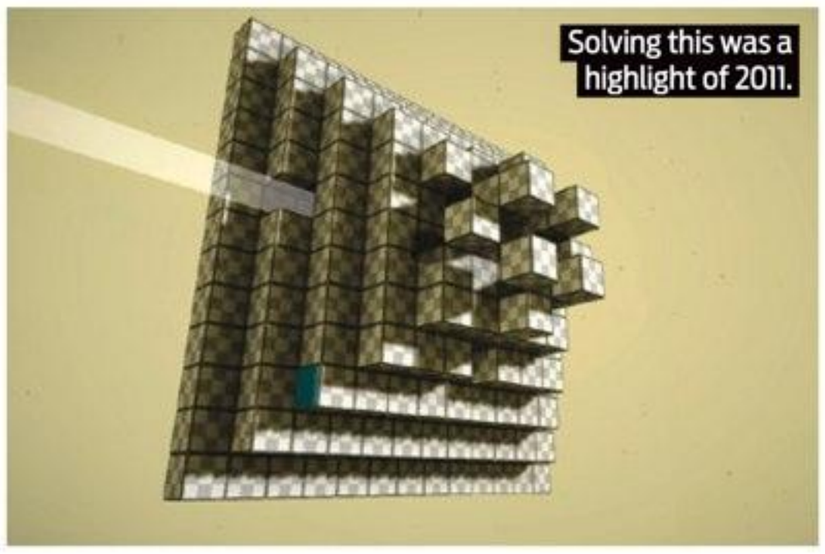
Copy protection
Steam

VERDICT

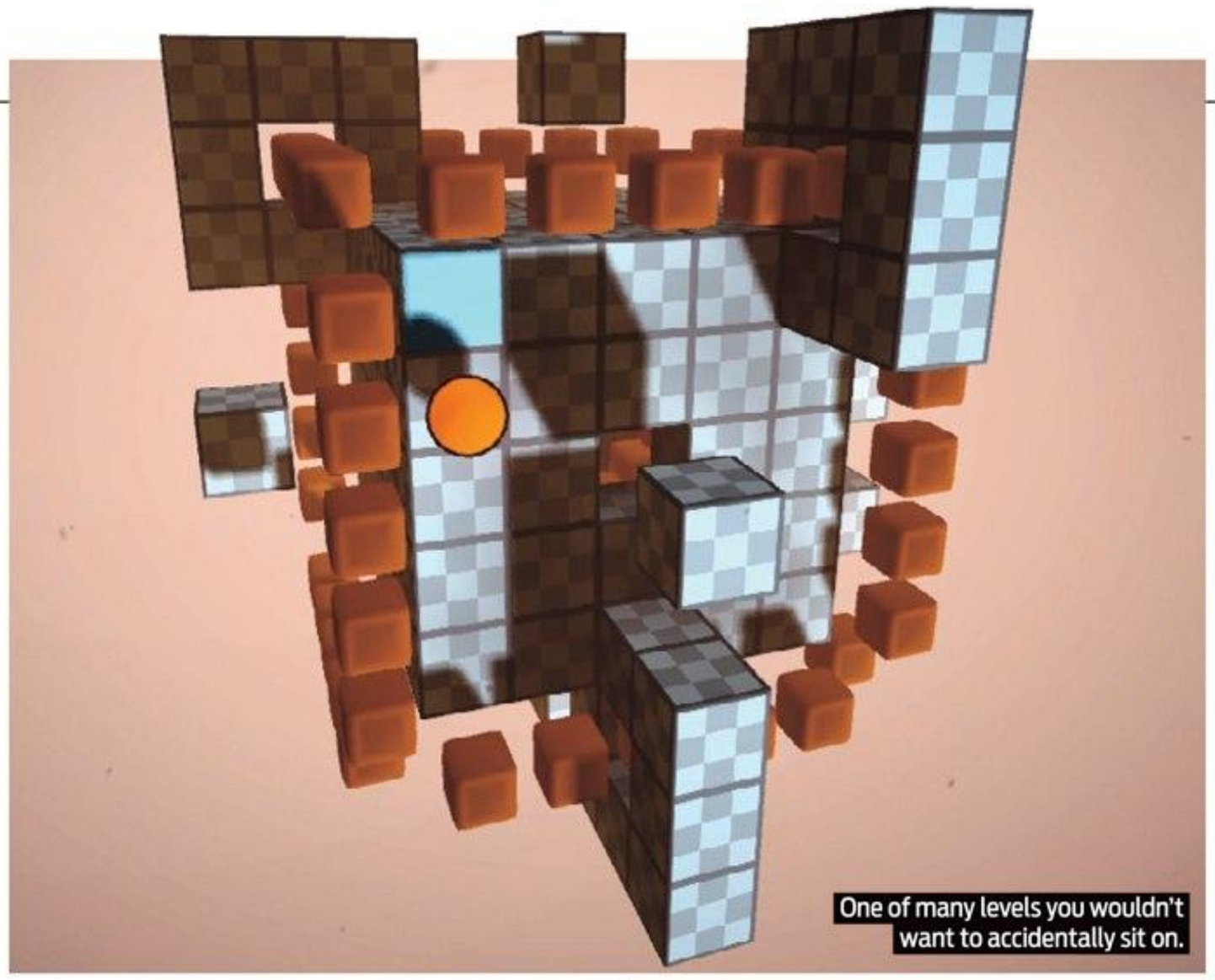
The original indie success story receives the update it deserves. If you still haven't played this gem, now's the perfect time.

PC GAMER **88**

Winner of the Turner Prize, 2012.



Solving this was a highlight of 2011.



One of many levels you wouldn't want to accidentally sit on.

MARBLE RADNESS

Geometry and physics receive an elegant remix in

ENGLISH COUNTRY TUNE *by Chris Donlan*

This one isn't going so well.

Need to know

What is it?
An abstract puzzle game that likes to muddle its own rules.

Influenced by
Marble Madness, Portal

Play it on
Any PC

Alternatively
Puzzle Dimension, 82%

Copy protection
Steam

There are times when *English Country Tune* feels like an entrance exam for MIT or Google. I stare at the screen, and realize I have no idea what to do, let alone how I'm supposed to do it. It's a game that isn't afraid to make you feel stupid.

It can also make you feel giddy with joy when everything suddenly clicks. Its challenges haunt you throughout the day, while its solutions come to you in the night, and you wake up happy. I'd forgotten that puzzles could work that way.

You're a square of blue tile traveling end over end across a series of blocky arenas, pushing objects around and getting into abstract scrapes. You can climb walls, and you can crawl down the back of a level and out the other side. The twist is that traversal is just the starting point for a game that rewrites its rules and objectives with each new batch of challenges.

So while you're pushing blocks off ledges in Whale, you're leaving cubes in your wake in Planting, as your mission switches from sweeping up to covering every surface of a three-dimensional object without getting trapped.

Bizarre physics

My favorite section, however, is Advanced Cutting, in which you move over a series of spikes – each one punching a hole in your card so that you can match the pattern you need to unlock the exit. It's reverse-engineering at its most tactile; it's there, and then it's gone, and you're on to something completely different.

A lot of the things that you're asked to do in *English Country Tune* exist in a terrifying realm of pure geometry, where spatial awareness is confounded by bizarre physics. In Larva, for example, you're tasked with prodding a series of spheres into ditches, except the spheres borrow their understanding of gravity from the direction you push them in, meaning they may simply edge along the floor if you shove from behind, but they'll fall sideways off the screen if you shove from the side. There's an undo option, thankfully, letting you cancel your moves one by one, unstitching a series of increasingly catastrophic mistakes. It's a blunt approach to handling difficulty, but it encourages you to learn while you fumble along.

And learning ultimately lies at the heart of *English Country Tune*, which isn't too surprising once you know that it's the work of indie developer Stephen Lavelle, a man who once wondered what *Tetris* would be like if you had to play it backwards, and then built a version that worked that way in order to find out. He's the sort of game developer we need more of, and *English Country Tune* is the sort of puzzler we need more of, too. It's precise, infuriating and endlessly open-minded. ■

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Increpare ◆ **Developer** Increpare
◆ **Multiplayer** None ◆ **Link** www.englishcountrytune.com

VERDICT

Stylish and obscure, this is a fascinating exploration of abstract puzzle design. No idea where the name comes from, though.

PC GAMER **85**

Find more issues at magazinesdownload.com

Hope you enjoy this fight, you've got two more rounds.

Kill it with fire! I'll be outside. Cheering you on.

WORLD OF LOVECRAFT

MAGICKA: THE STARS ARE LEFT!

adds a dash of Lovecraft *by Richard Cobbett*

Gaming's spice rack is a terrifying thing. FPS tasting little bland? Add zombies. Need to add a little kick to your fantasy game? Try a squeeze of Elder God with a pinch of cinnamon to soften the lingering aftertaste of death.

Magicka's DLC take on *The Call of Cthulhu* goes little further than this basic flavoring. Your team of wizards accidentally woke up the Big Calamari himself, and only a copious number of fire bombs, lightning walls, and whatever else you can mix up can send him back to bed without his supper.

While Magicka is always best as a four-player game, only the most experienced players should take on this DLC's brief three chapters alone. Some expansions take the gloves off early. *The Stars Are Left* sneers at the mere concept of gloves, with multi-wave arena fights and giant bosses right from the start. The one concession to solo players is a fairy companion who offers one free revive per checkpoint at the cost of putting up with a tiresome parody of Navi from *Ocarina of Time*.

Any reasonably experienced group, however, should finish in a couple of hours, with only the last boss presenting a major difficulty spike. Getting four players together is easier than you might think, as only the host actually needs to own the DLC.

Beyond the main campaign, you also get a couple of challenge maps—one with a tendency to break almost immediately—and a few new toys, including an Investigator's robe complete with adorable magnifying glass staff.

As a parody of Lovecraft, *The Stars Are Left* is a deeply underbaked adventure, and only the most hardcore need apply to take on the single-player campaign. It's not a bad way to get your gang of wizards back together for another evening of spell-slinging fun though, especially if you split the cost. ■

PC GAMER **62**

◆ **Price** $6 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Link** www.magickagame.com ◆ **ESRB** T

SRSLY?

SERIOUS SAM 3: BFE flips a giant middle-finger to all modern, cover-based FPSes ***by Steve Hogarty***

Need to know

What is it?
FPS prequel to 2001's *Serious Sam: The First Encounter* that finally, *finally* fills in those plot holes you've been wondering about.

Influenced by
Some of those pretty demos in 3DMark's benchmarking software and half a dozen of the best *Quake* mods

Play it on
Intel i5 CPU, 4GB ram, GeForce GTX 460 or Radeon HD 4890

Alternatively
Bulletstorm, 80%

Copy protection
One-time activation, or Steam

No cover. All man. So reads *Serious Sam 3: BFE*'s macho tagline. Those other shooters you've been playing? The ones that let you hide your character behind things? You're playing as a coward. If you could have looked down to peer through your digital trousers you'd have seen a pile of ghastly formless voxels where your bump-mapped man-genitals should have been. *Serious Sam* despises you and your contemporary FPS standards, in a fun way that's sometimes difficult to appreciate as intentionally ironic.

As with his previous games in the series, *Serious Sam 3: BFE* is a first-person shooter that prides itself on bedlam and ultra-violent, large-scale carnage versus tens of thousands of streaming, screaming monsters. It's defiantly old-school-PC in tone, confidently jabbing a retro elbow into the sides of modern shooter conventions. Even Sam's fleet of foot motions feel weirdly outlandish as he scoots in all directions like a hyperactive ghost, all nimble, lightweight and carefree. And this is despite him carrying a dozen different weapons, from sledgehammer to shotguns, miniguns, rocket launchers and an electro-leash obviously (and hilariously) inspired by *Bulletstorm*.

Put up your Duke

Enemies spawn in their droves, from crowds of cyclopic fanged gorillas and skeletal chain-chucking horses, to giant scorpions with chainguns for arms and headless, sprinting, bomb-fisted kamikaze soldiers. Each enemy has its own distinct movement, attack patterns, and weaknesses, and it's in prioritizing the most dangerous of them—picking them out of a clattering bunch of 50 or 60 enemies—that the challenge lies.

So it's awesome that the game's campaign is playable up to 16-player co-op, and although the population of enemies is adjusted to account for the number of challengers, proceedings are decidedly more relaxed this way. You respawn on death, for example, rather than having to restart from your last save.

Serious Same

Survival mode is a distillation of the form, pitting you and (if you like) co-op buddies against waves of increasingly tough enemies in one of two arenas. Elsewhere, despite introducing a *Duke Nukem*-like plot as schlocky as it is charmless, the campaign feels like a lingering, grudging concession. A heavily templated and mazelike series of levels into which the meat-paste of *Serious Sam*'s sublime and pure death arcade has been pumped. There are a few moments of beautiful design: the occasional genius placement of a surprise onslaught of kamikaze soldiers or in the triggering of a shrewd mousetrap. The visuals, however, are somehow greyer and less expansive than 2005's second *Sam*, it's left to some swanky new particle effects to impress players.

The return of most of *Serious Sam*'s most familiar weapons and enemies, at the expense of much new content, will just as likely leave you exhausted as elated. But if you felt even vaguely like fist-pumping upon hearing the tagline "No cover. All man," give *Serious Sam 3: BFE* a shot. ■

Spot the deference

Bulletstorm: doing it first and doing it better

1. Kicking things
Sam can only kick certain enemy types. *Bulletstorm*, on the other hand, has a dedicated kicking button.

2. Cannons
Bulletstorm's Bouncer gun fires a cannonball-like projectile. *Serious Sam 3*'s cannon fires an *actual* cannonball.

3. Electric leash
Sam can explode enemies with a glowing leash. *Bulletstorm*'s leash lets you fling them around the map first.

◆ **Price** $40 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Devolver Digital ◆ **Developer** Croteam ◆ **Multiplayer** up to 16 ◆ **Link** www.serioussam.com ◆ **ESRB** M

VERDICT

A hugely fun, mega-frenetic co-op shooter that embodies the soul, and depth, of 90's twitch shooters.

PC GAMER 70

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One of the best weapons is this double-barreled classic.

Indigenous Egyptian wildlife.

Co-op is where *Serious Sam* is most gratifying.

One of two death animations!

Swarms tend to come in swarms.

Tired of blood yet?

BREAKTHROUGH

Hold still, **UNITY OF COMMAND**, while I pin this medal on you ***by Tim Stone***

Need to know

What is it?
A deceptively-simple Eastern Front wargame in which logistics play a crucial role

Influenced by
Panzer General, Chess

Play it on
Any PC

Alternatively
Panzer Corps (81%)

Copy Protection
Serial number

Unity of Command doesn't come with conventional AI. Buy the game, and the Croatian devs mail you two giant, powder-filled bags, one labeled "Erich von Jerkhole," the other "Boris Bastardov." You open these bags, add five gallons of vodka to the Russian one and five gallons of schnapps to the German one, then stand back as two super-sly East Front generals materialize in front of you.

OK, that's not completely true—but playing this exceptionally ergonomic hex wargame can make you forget that you're not up against a real-life Zhukov or Manstein. When you're blitzkrieging toward an objective and realize the enemy has just sidestepped your assault and severed your supply line from the rear. When a row of pummeled foes pulls back to man more tenable positions. When Germany pickaxes a neat hole in the weakest section of your front, then pumps Grossdeutschland supermen through the breach. At humbling moments like these, the years that have gone into this two-man indie effort really start to show.

Mind games

Unity is smart and nuanced, and there's an unmistakable Eastern Front tang to the 18 scenarios that make up the two campaigns. As the CO of Army Group South, you'll have to learn to put up with partisan hassles, air superiority-negating blizzards, and fragile Romanian, Hungarian and Italian allies. Serving Stalin means accepting the innate inferiority of Ivan's infantry corps. Whichever side you select, no advance is likely to proceed without a long, hard look at the supply map.

Oftentimes, generals aren't looking to smash enemy units in one fell swoop; they're out to encircle and suffocate them over the course of two or three turns. *Unity*—like the 1942 to 1943 operations that inspired it—is all about turning bulges into pockets, and bottlenecks into graveyards.

More in tune with its subject-matter than recent peer *Panzer Corps*, the game has a similarly-trim interface and old-fashioned approach to campaigning. Because developer 2x2 has plucked its pleasingly-petite battles (most can be squeezed into an hour) chronologically from the pages of history, early campaign episodes aren't necessarily easier than later ones. Continuity is provided via a simple victory points system: winning quickly in early outings means more funds for reinforcements in subsequent ones. It works, but you may find yourself picturing the battle engine married to something bolder—a strat-map metagame, perhaps.

With the Caucasus covered, an expansion focused on Moscow and Leningrad seems like the next logical step. Wherever this evocative engine heads next, discerning commanders should rally behind it. Wargames this fresh and friendly, with opponents as formidable as Erich and Boris, tend to inspire deep loyalty. ■

◆ **Price** $30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** 2x2 Games ◆ **Developer** In-house
◆ **Multiplayer** 2 players, online or hotseat ◆ **Link** www.unityofcommand.net

VERDICT

Unlike most Eastern Front wargames, *Unity* fends off overdone unit counts and dull AI. Wargame of the Year material.

PC GAMER **84**

Find more issues at magazinesdownload.com

GOUGED

DEAD ISLAND: BLOODBATH ARENA delivers plenty of blood for plenty of dough *by Tom Senior*

The most surprising part of this collection of survival maps is their location. Instead of having the arenas accessible from the main menu, they're plonked into the middle of the world, deep inside a sewer.

There you'll find a unit of macho soldier types who've pledged to spend the rest of their days fighting to earn as many man points as possible before a zombie makes a meal of their gray matter. They've set up four arenas hosting endless waves of zombies: the easiest map is set in a cramped, rocky niche at the top of a ravine (perfect for kicking zombies into). The middling maps take place in two swamps: one set in the dead of night, the other packed with tall grass that hides the approaching hordes. The hardest map takes place in a huge multi-level facility that still doesn't quite feel big enough.

"Spare rib, anybody?"

Worse is the fact that the survival modes provide the exact same toe-to-toe zombie fighting you find throughout *Dead Island*; it's the items that dedicated teams will really be playing for. The Sonic Pulse Grenade that makes zombie heads explode is a satisfying reward, but the new environments simply aren't enough to justify the $10 price tag. ■

PC GAMER **59**

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Deep Silver ◆ **Developer** Techland ◆ **Link** bit.ly/i5Ef12 ◆ **ESRB** M

FALLING DOWN

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!! FOR THE AWESOME makes you jump for joy *by Chris Donalan*

BASE jumping is at its best when it's a slick arcade score rush. 2009's *A Reckless Disregard for Gravity* set the tone, filling a series of abstract skyscraper stacks with point-boosting distractions and self-conscious humor, before sending you in with nothing but a wingsuit for protection.

Now, *For the Awesome* concentrates on upping the challenge, remastering the original campaign's 80-odd jumps and bringing in 43 more. The wingsuit's faster, the environments are moderately prettier, and the design is a touch meaner: the new levels skillfully tempt you towards taking risks, with dead ends that provide swift punishment when you do.

It's the right approach, since this is a game that's at its best when it's pushing you to the point of unblinking concentration that's threatening to tip into rage. To keep you

It's like falling through Charlie Sheen's mind.

playing, *For the Awesome*'s smartest levels are all-out insanity: they push you into the rotating fans of a factory turbine, then down past thickets of roving laser beams, before throwing you into an asteroid field.

The game's still a bit too repetitive for its own good, but its single-minded agenda makes it easy to fall for in brief, concentrated bursts. ■

PC GAMER **79**

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Developer** Dejobaan Games, Owlchemy Labs ◆ **Link** bit.ly/tfVFbZ ◆ **ESRB** NR

PC GAMER

How we review

Wherever possible, we finish every game before finalizing the review. We review each game on its own merits and match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The primary aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions. As such, we'll review content of all types in addition to the latest big-name releases.

Our scoring system explained

0-30% Intolerable
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31-45% Weak
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60% Mediocre
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice, even if you find it cheap.

61-75% Fair
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76-89% Good
Enjoyable, well-made, and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ Editor's Choice
A glowing example within its genre of excellence in design and execution.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

A game scoring 80% or more is eligible to receive the PC Gamer Editor's Choice award. The Editor's personal seal of approval means we think the recipient is a truly great example of its genre.

PC Gamer's 10 Latest and Greatest

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (94%)
February 2012

Minecraft (96%)
February 2012

Deus Ex: Human Revolution —The Missing Link (90%)
January 2012

Orcs Must Die! (90%)
Holiday 2011

Bastion (92%)
December 2011

Limbo (92%)
November 2011

Deus Ex: Human Revolution (94%)
October 2011

Jamestown: Legend of the Lost Colony (90%)
October 2011

Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition (92%)
October 2011

Frozen Synapse (87%)
September 2011

EXTRA LIFE

GET MORE FROM YOUR GAMING

REINSTALL

CLASSICS OF PC GAMING REVISITED

Shogo: Mobile Armor Division

WITH GREAT FIGHTING OF HEART, NOBLE ROBOTS TO PURSUE GLORY! *by Richard Cobbett*

Rockets? Boom. Giant robots? Boom. Parked cars? Boom.

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Caution: Forklifts. Also, walking doom-tanks.

Nothing cool lasts forever. When *Shogo* first landed in 1998, it was in a world where anime was finally making a splash in the West. The likes of *Ghost in the Shell* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* were becoming geek household names, making it not just acceptable but (almost) cool to watch cartoons full of blood and nudity, with episode names like "GIVE UP! But Just Before We Do, The Sure Kill Sword Appears!"

In retrospect, *Shogo* is a slightly toe-curling snapshot of that early excitement. Like so much of the anime world, it seemed exotic and authentic at the time, when not many of us had seen much of it. Seeing it through more experienced eyes now, *Shogo*'s take on Japanese mecha feels heavy-handed, clichéd, and obvious; like a tourist visiting Germany and immediately investing in a pair of lederhosen and a beer stein to fit in with the locals. Japanese names? Check. Japanese intro song? Check, and one that's ironically very inappropriately appropriate, in the spirit of the time. Authentic Japanese feel? Not even close, from the bad English-dubbed dialog to the way main character Sanjuro's base houses a ridiculous collection of shout-outs thrown in to prove the designers' love of the genre. There's a sexy girl poster on his wall with a "CURV" logo ripped straight from *Evangelion*. His (unseen) fellow officers include *Patlabor*'s Noa Izumi and *Macross*' Isamu Dyson. Like so much else, this was cool at the time. Now? Kinda cheap.

KAWAII! SUGOI! YURUSENAI!

Cheap also describes the general feel of the game. *Shogo* was the first outing of Monolith's Lithtech engine, which would go on to power the amazing *No One Lives Forever*, as well as *Blood 2*. Most of the design problems are unsurprising for 1998, including big, largely featureless levels, low-polygon models that make everyone look like they've been stamped in the face with a shovel, and no real way for the characters to express themselves beyond facing each other and waving their arms while audio files play. On release, *Shogo*'s focus on storytelling and character dialog was still pretty refreshing though, spoiled only by *Half-Life* and (to a lesser extent) *SiN* rewriting the rule book.

GANBATTE! IRRASHAIMASE!

Its central gimmick remains cool though, and ripe for ripping off. Throughout, you regularly swap between traditional FPS action on foot, and running around in a giant mecha to really cut loose and blow stuff up. Say what you will about the big, hulking battle-tanks of games like *MechWarrior* and *Starsiege*, there's something great about the Japanese "physical extension of the pilot" variety, which offer the perfect mix of speed, power and sleek design. *Shogo* is no exception, giving you insane firepower and all the explosions its early particle system can handle. Rockets? Boom. Giant robots? Boom. Parked cars? Boom.

Oddly, though, even in the mecha stages where you're high above the streets shooting at enemies who exist solely to be crushed underfoot, the experience feels more like running around a model town than actually being a giant. This is partially because there isn't a lot of stuff in the environment to provide a sense of scale, but the problem is mostly the speed of the action. Whether on foot or in your robot, you blitz around at roughly half the speed of light, and the feel of the combat is oddly unchanged. Both you and most of the mechs you face are spectacularly fragile, to the point that being on-foot is far from the killer disadvantage you'd expect, and you rarely get to savor the feeling of

READ ME

RELEASE DATE
1998

PUBLISHER
Monolith Productions

DEVELOPER
Monolith Productions

WHAT WE SAID THEN
"One of the most adrenaline-charged shooters we've seen since *Duke Nukem 3D*." December 1998 issue, 90%

GET IT
$6—www.gog.com

VIDEO GUIDE
Let's Play Shogo
bit.ly/sgZHm3

GAWKIEST MECHA
Light Armor

UGLIEST GUARD
NPC #463

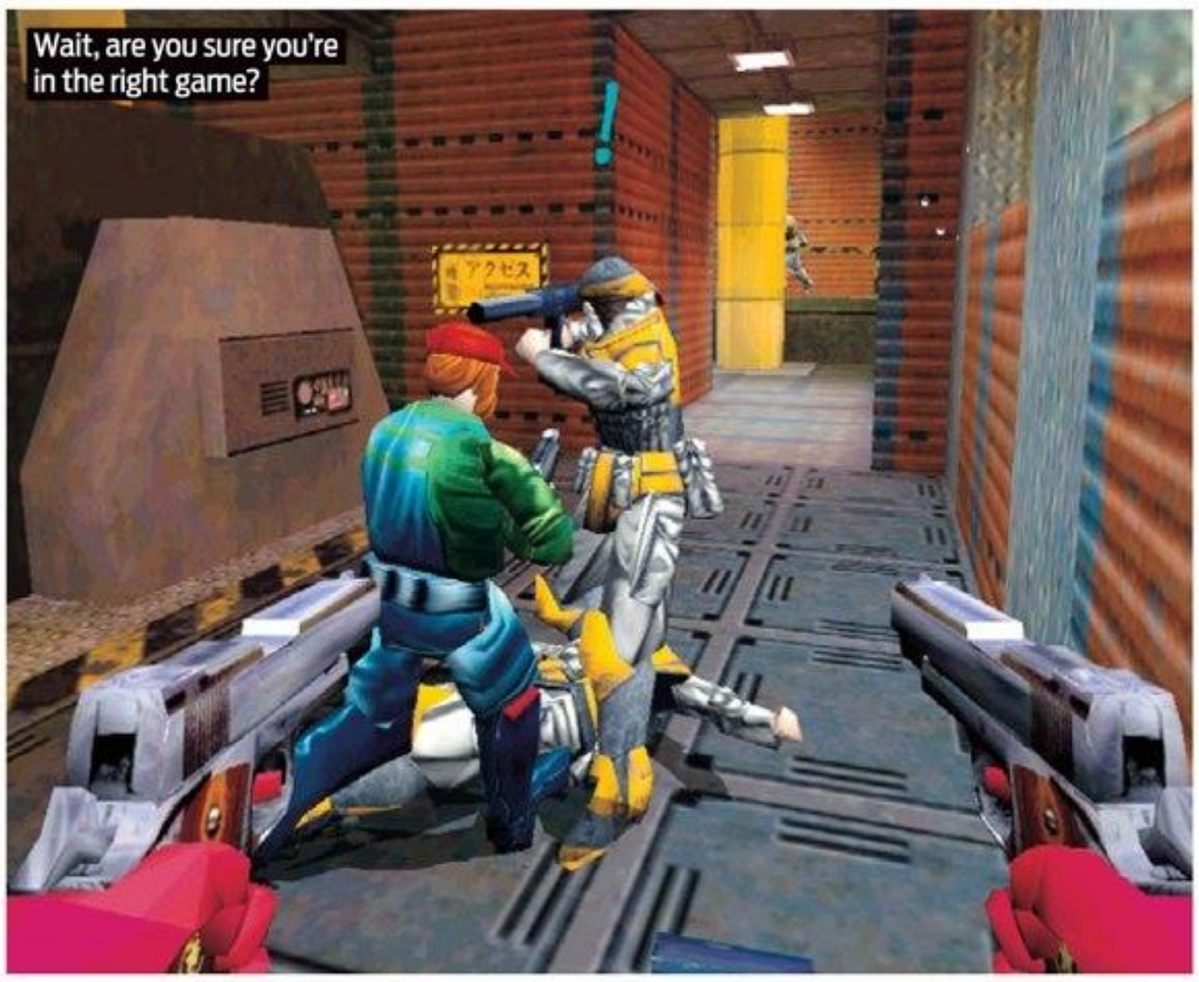
TRIVIA
If you've played Monolith's later games, you've seen lots of *Shogo* shout-outs. *F.E.A.R.*'s evil Armacham corporation started off in *Shogo* (much like how Ultor merged Volition's *Red Faction* and *Saints Row* into one crazy universe), and the game includes a bonus room where you can hear the awful J-pop theme on a radio. In *F.E.A.R. 2*, Snake Fist wore a fan-baiting *Shogo 2* t-shirt. *The Matrix Online* even snuck in a Club Shogo nightclub, and more than a few weapons in Monolith games are credited to its feuding companies. *No One Lives Forever* also included a gravestone dedicated to a character who dies in the course of the story. Even *Blood 2* got into it, with some posters on the walls. Not many one-game wonders get this many references.

YOUR PC IN 1998
Pentium II 300 MHz, 3Dfx Voodoo 2 GPU, 64MB RAM, 56kbps modem, 15" CRT monitor, Windows 98

actually being a giant death machine. Most of this is more apparent in retrospect than it was at the time, and none of it stopped *Shogo* from developing a cult following that would still love to see a sequel. No argument there. It's amazing how few mech games we've seen in the last few years, now that technology is finally powerful enough to render awesomely destructible cities instead of a few boxes and empty planes. The industry decided that nobody cared any more, even when one look at a Wanzer, an Aestivalis, or any other cool giant robot should be enough to explain why a whole generation would kill to go stomp around Tokyo. At least we're getting a new *MechWarrior*.

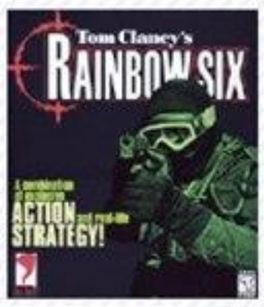
A whole generation would kill to go stomp around Tokyo.

For its part, Monolith was going to continue the *Shogo* story with expansions, but delays and mediocre sales resulted in it bouncing around several genres in search of a hit before finally striking it big with *F.E.A.R.* and *Condemned*. Even so, references in later games still show a fondness for *Shogo*, so there must be someone in the company who'd love to have a second crack at it. As long as it doesn't get in the way of *No One Lives Forever 3*, who could complain about more stompy robots? ■



OTHER 1998 GAMES WE ❤

STARSIEGE: TRIBES
Evan: This gem shaped my devotion to twitch-reflex shooters with its blazing speed and emphasis on mobility. With a bevy of wide-open maps, you're given a choice: vie for the flag using the then-unintended jetpack skiing technique, or hole up in your base and engineer the perfect defense.



TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX
Greg: This was my first exposure to the wonderful world of tactical shooters. With pre-planned waypoints and specific instructions for my team of operatives, I knew that every failed mission was no one's fault but my own.

STARCRAFT: BROOD WAR
Lucas: This legendary expansion delivered the goods in both single-player and multiplayer, showing Kerrigan in a whole new light and adding fan-favorite units like the Protoss Dark Templar and Terran Medic. It also included my most-beloved *StarCraft* unit: the Zerg's noob-friendly, grief-tastic Lurker.

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FREE GAMES STUFF FROM THE WEB

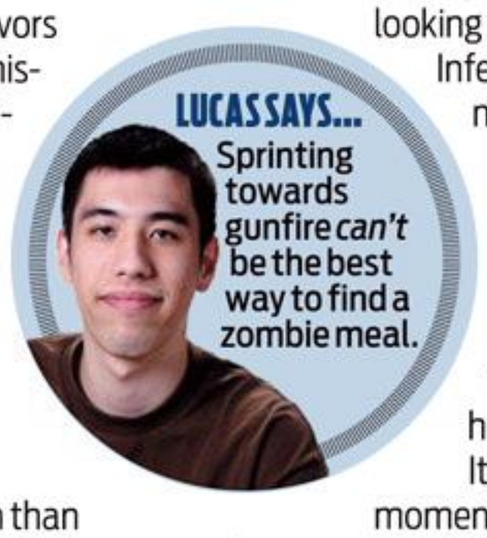
Hands out, shambling instead of running—this zombie clearly just wants a hug.

1 Half-dead, too

MOD NO MORE ROOM IN HELL FILLS *HALF-LIFE 2* WITH ZOMBIES

No More Room in Hell has been—appropriately enough—in a development hell of its own since *Half-Life 2* came out way back in 2004. After five years of hard work on their Romero zombie-movie mod, the mod team decided to start again from scratch. Now, at last, it's been released in a semi-playable state.

The game pitches straggly survivors against hordes of the undead, in missions that involve getting the survivors to a safe zone, intact. But even if its cooperative zombie-smashing errs on the side of Valve's own *Left 4 Dead*, it's still impressive for a mod made by a handful of people. It's a far trickier endeavor than Valve's game, for starters: these zombies are slow-moving but tough, and more often than not, it's death at first bite.



LUCAS SAYS... Sprinting towards gunfire *can't* be the best way to find a zombie meal.

Other big differences include a doubling of the party size, which results in a bunch of clones of Patrick Bateman or Walter Sobchak running around—like an *American Psycho* or *Big Lebowski* convention, but with zombies. Get bitten enough and you'll transform into a zombie yourself—which is, after all, the way it normally works in the movies.

Despite its numerous flaws, *No More Room in Hell* has a rugged charm all of its own. The levels are detailed and well-designed versions of real-life locales such as New York's Chinatown, and the shambling zombies are detestable without looking too much like Valve's own Infected. They've also been cleverly motion-captured by means of a hacked Kinect—something that wouldn't have been possible if the team hadn't rebooted their project. Even the amateur sound design works quite well, with a score that would be at home in a grimy '70s horror flick.

It's definitely in beta at the moment, though. Unless you're lucky, you'll spend half an hour waiting for a vacant in-game slot to come up only for the game to crash. It's in definite need of polish, but there's an incredible amount of potential here. One to keep a dislodged eye on. **Henry Winchester**

SIZE 1.18GB LINK bit.ly/atqnE9

2 ADD-ONS

SAD ANDREAS

REDISCOVER THE JOYS OF *SAN ANDREAS* WITH THESE MODS

» *GTA: San Andreas* is feeling awfully lonely right now, sulking in the shadows of *GTA IV* and *V*. Show it some love with these sweet mods.

UltraHD
Give the game a fresh coat of paint with this complete mod pack, which ups the textures and polygons on just about everything. *bit.ly/gtasahd*

Jurassic Park
Adds dinos and the complete *JP* island. CJ may not have luck amassing a gang of velociraptors, but by God, he can try. *bit.ly/GTAdinos*

Dark Knight
An homage to Chris Nolan's films, this mod adds Bats, his Tumbler, and that mini-motorcycle to the incongruously-sunny setting. *bit.ly/batpants*

Multi Theft Auto
Adds multiplayer. There's nothing like chasing your pals down the street while strapped to a missile. *bit.ly/multiGTA*

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3 Unusual suspects

SKINS SAINTS ROW: THE THIRD WITH UGLY MUGS

Saints Row: The Third is turning out to be a bit of a sleeper hit. Amidst the sound and fury of the pre-Christmas season, it remained the only game to feature an angry tiger that can be calmed with powerslides.

The madness doesn't end there. Thanks to the game's exhaustive character creation tool, you can cruise Steelport as anyone from Homer Simpson to a blow-up doll. We've been through the community site and picked our favorites.

For each of the following models, just click "Add To Queue" in the top right of its page. Then, through the in-game character creation interface, select the option to connect to *saintsrow3.com*. Once it's synched to your account, the new duds will show up in your queue. **EL**

A toilet

Game designers love to put toilets in games, but they're oddly coy about toilet protagonists. Remedy this colossal oversight by playing *Saints Row* as a sassy, floating, gun-wielding ceramic ass-kicker. It's normally a reward for finishing the game, but this link allows you to see the cutscenes as a talking crapper.

SIZE Web-based LINK bit.ly/lolpotty

The Joker

If you want to play *Batman: Arkham City* as the Clown Prince of Crime, you're out of luck. If you're willing to swap Gotham for Steelport, on the other hand, you can lead the Saints as the Joker himself. And with that purple coat, he fits right in.

SIZE Web-based LINK bit.ly/saintsrowjoker

Niko Bellic

If you'd like to wander around Steelport quietly resenting the life you're forced to lead, here's the outfit you need. Perhaps surfing atop a VTOL laser-jet as it flies under a suspension bridge will be enough to bring a smile to gaming's crabbiest Eastern European.

SIZE Web-based LINK bit.ly/saintsrowniko

4 FREEWARE

SHADOWY SNEAK

FUMBLING IN THE DARK WITH *STEALTH BASTARD*

A stage-based 2D platformer in the vein of *Super Meat Boy* and *N+*, *Stealth Bastard* has also inherited the pace, difficulty and violence of games like *Deus Ex*, *Hitman* and *Super Mario Brothers*.

You steer a goggled field agent from entrance to exit, hitting switches and shoving boxes to solve stealthy puzzles as you go. Success is a case of knowing when to move and when to hide: enemy robots will laser you into bloody chunks if they catch a glimpse of you, but smart checkpoints keep the frustration to a minimum.

The stages are timed, and the comprehensive leaderboards encourage speed runs. There's a level builder and the ability to share creations with no hassle. For a free game, it's an incredibly generous, highly polished package—there's nothing illegitimate about it. **GT**

SIZE 19.5MB
LINK bit.ly/stealthbastard

It's a very encouraging game—right before it lasers you in half.

MACHINIMA

Shout at your monitor with the best of the internet's **SKYRIM** vids

Skyrim is many things: immersive RPG, challenging dungeon-crawler, automated anecdote generator. It's also an opportunity for witty gamers to pull off spectacular stunts, abuse the AI, and stretch the game engine to its limits. **GH**

Groundhog day

1 YouTuber Hunter Normandy is a fragile fellow, being felled by anything from stubbing his toe to over-aggressively shouting at a chicken. *bit.ly/skyrimdeaths*

Brethren Castle 2

2 Take away all the textures, and *Skyrim* bears more than a passing resemblance to everyone's favorite team-based shooter/hat museum. *bit.ly/skyrimtf2*

Bear Bowling 2.0

3 Cow launching, waterfalls of dead giants, and billion bear tsunamis are just a few nefarious console commands away. *bit.ly/skyrimcheats*

Infinite dragons!

4 It takes a real man to use the console to spawn several dragons on top of himself. It takes a lesser man to subsequently turn on godmode. *bit.ly/unlimiteddragons*

Discover secrets of the frozen north

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Easy

TIME 2 hours

VITAL LINKS:

UESP Wiki: info on items and quests
bit.ly/Skwiki

The *PCG* tourist's guide to Skyrim
bit.ly/SkyTourist

Tom's video of extreme pickpocketing
bit.ly/vwZnga

Guide to handy console commands
bit.ly/SkyConsole

TOM FRANCIS FINDS THE BEST BITS OF **THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM**

As the Greybeards' ancient mantra goes, the land of *Skyrim* is big and really full of stuff. You can happily explore it for hundreds of hours, but you can also make those hundreds of hours happier if you do some of the coolest stuff early on. It's not just a case of better gear for higher stats: *Skyrim*'s most interesting secrets can change the way you play, open up new lives to live, and turn people into sweet rolls.

Because of the game's incredibly open-ended structure, any given snippet of information might be something you discovered in the first half hour of play, or something you still don't know after months. You might already know a few of these, but with any luck, plenty of them will be new. Even the main quest is something a lot of gamers skip, so when it's worth doing we'll let you know how far you need to get through it to access the cool stuff.

As far as spoilers go, this guide will inevitably tip you off to abilities and items you can acquire, and where to get them. We'll skip over the plot details, though, since there's no particular advantage to knowing them in advance, and it's fun to discover them for yourself.

1 Become a werewolf

In *Oblivion*, the Fighter's Guild was pretty boring. In *Skyrim*, it turns you into a full-blown werewolf. I'll skip the reasons, but the upshot is that once a day, you can use a power that transforms you into your Beast Form. For a limited time, you can bound around on all fours, knock people flying with your claws, and eat their bodies to regain health and extend your wolf time. The downside is that you can't wear armor, use weapons, or drink potions while all wolfed out.

2 Become a vampire

Becoming a bloodsucker is easy: just let a vampire hit you a few times. There's a fort full of them south-southeast of Helgen, where you first start the game. Wait until you get a disease, and don't cure it for a few days. You won't be shunned by society, unless you go a long time without feeding on unconscious victims. Not feeding is also how you get the most powerful abilities, including two minutes of invisibility. For a cure, ask any innkeeper for rumors.

3 Cheap Paralysis

The Paralysis spell is one of the best spells in the game. It freezes people solid, and they keel over while they're frozen. It's a high-level Alteration spell that costs a vast amount of magicka, but luckily, there's a shortcut. Early in Snapleg Cave, halfway up a cliff-face east of Ivarstead, there's an open chest containing a Staff of Paralysis (an item anyone can use, which paralyzes the target for 10 seconds with every shot). It can be recharged with cheap soul gems.

4 Get a pet demon

When you turn (level) 14, do what any 14-year-old should (under no circumstances): head to the nearest tavern. You'll find a guy named Sam Guinne there—accept his drinking challenge. If you can't find him, try Whiterun, or hit ` and type "player.placeatme 0001BB9C" to summon him. He leads to a highly-entertaining quest, rewarding you a staff that summons a Dremora: an armored servant of hell who'll fight for you with a huge Daedric sword.

5 Call in dragon support

No easy shortcut to this one, I'm afraid, but it's worth knowing: if you complete the main quest, you get a Shout power that'll summon a dragon to help you. He takes a moment to fly in, then swoops around attacking your enemies for a few minutes before flying off. Like most dragons, focus is not his strong point: he'll attack, fly off, swoop around, then attack again. He's unrivaled when it comes to pure spectacle though.

6 Kill in one hit

There are lots of ways to deal damage in *Skyrim*, but sneak attacks are king. Draugr make good practice: sneak around Nordic crypts and melee them before they rise from the dead. Early on, every hit levels you up in Sneak. Join the Dark Brotherhood to get the Shrouded Gloves for double sneak-attack damage; stick with daggers, and you do 15x more. They stack, so you end up doing 3,000% normal damage—enough to kill almost anything.

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7 Get "free" training

Plenty of people in *Skyrim* can train you in their preferred skill, but it's expensive—if you let them keep your money. When the skill they're training you in is Pickpocketing, though, stealing your money back from them is practically homework. Try swiping it back after each level you pay for; smaller amounts are easier to steal. In the Thieves' Guild, there isn't even a penalty for getting caught—and the gear they give you will help you do it.

8 Steal people's clothes

Once you've trained Pickpocketing all you can, keep practicing: it's worth getting it to ridiculous levels. You don't need to be especially good at sneaking to grind it: just ditch all the stolen items you care about somewhere, and start stealing. You'll inevitably get caught—pay the paltry fine, pickpocket the arresting officer, and repeat. At Pickpocketing 90, you can steal weapons from people's hands. At Pickpocketing 100, you can nab armor right off their back.

9 Find a 'shroom forest

Oh gosh. Blackreach. Probably the most beautiful and unusual place in *Skyrim*, hidden deep under an already extremely deep dwarven ruin: Alftand. It's not immediately accessible, though, so head north from Winterhold onto the icebergs until you see a cave on your compass. Find it, and the guy inside will help get you into Blackreach. Be prepared for a long, tough, and exciting adventure with a spectacular visual reward.

10 Steal dreams

The people of Dawnstar can't sleep. Look into it, and you'll discover a great quest in an old haunted watchtower. I won't spoil the plot, but there are a few ways it can play out. If you want to be able steal people's dreams, it should be obvious that you have to Do The Wrong Thing. It'll get you the Skull of Corruption, a staff that can suck the dreams out of sleeping people and use them as charges to do extra damage when you fight with it.

11 Throw your voice

Unrelenting Force, unlocked early on, is the most satisfying Dragon Shout. But there's another great shout with a subtler use. Head to the mountains north-east of Whiterun and follow the dragon head icon on your compass to the Throw Voice shout. It creates a noise where you're aiming, luring your enemies to investigate—fantastic for baiting them into horrible traps, or just for slipping by.

12 Turn foes into chickens

Oblivion fans remember the Wabbajack, a staff that transformed people into random creatures. It's back in *Skyrim*, and it's even more random: now it can do anything from causing a lightning storm to turning dudes into sweet rolls. If that suits you, find a guy named Dervenin in the shopping district of Solitude, and help him out. The quest he'll lead you on is, in a word, imaginative.

SKILLS

POTION PREP

KEY INGREDIENTS FOR THE MOST USEFUL POTIONS

1 The potion you'll need most is Restore Health. Look for Wheat (from farms), Imp Stools (cave mushrooms), and Blue Mountain Flowers (they grow on mountains). They're all common, and any two together make a health potion.

2 Dragons breathe either fire or frost, so potions that boost your resistance to those are always handy. Snowberries, Purple Mountain Flowers and Frost Mirriam all make Resist Frost potions, and Bone Meal, Elves' Ear and Snowberries all make Resist Fire.

3 Every character type wants to disappear sometimes. Invisibility potions can be most easily made from Vampire Dust (see Step 2 on the opposite page), Nirnroot (glowing shrubs) and Ice Wraith Teeth (Ice Wraiths have them—it's polite to kill them first).

BONUS TIP

FREE ARROWS

Equip a companion with a single good arrow. They'll fire that type without ever running out, letting you pick them out of your enemies one by one.

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The Hard Stuff

GET THE PC YOUR GA

TESTED

Mach V

Falcon Northwest

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

Falcon Northwest has built up a lot of experience in the 14 years since *PC Gamer* declared it the company that literally "created the gaming PC."

The latest Mach V doesn't buck that trend either. Built around the latest technology available from Intel and Nvidia, this rig is fashioned to take you from today to tomorrow without being immediately outdated and obsolete.

What does that mean? Intel ostensibly will follow a two-CPU socket platform for the foreseeable future. The first is the well-known LGA 1155 and chips such as the famously fast and cheap Core i7-2600K. To that Intel is now adding its new high-end LGA 2011 socket (which effectively kills LGA 1366) and CPUs such as the 3.2GHz Core i7-3930K.

What advantage does the Core i7-3930K bring over the cheaper Core i7-2600K? The most notable feature is its two extra cores, but there's also double the system memory bandwidth and capacity. Not that any game will need it today, but you could easily get to 32GB of RAM for under $200 right now. You can't do that on LGA 1155 and a Core i7-2600 for less than $1,000. Systems using LGA 2011 also give you far more PCIe slots (and they're officially PCIe 3.0 too).

As gaming is still mostly about the GPU, Falcon chooses wisely with a pair of EVGA's new Classified GeForce GTX 580s in SLI mode. These cards feature jumbo sized frame buffers of 3GB—that's double a standard GeForce GTX 580—and are also clocked at 855MHz on the cores and 1,710MHz on the RAM. That's a healthy overclock over the standard GeForce GTX speeds of 772MHz cores and 1,544MHz on the RAM. Falcon says the extra-large frame buffers greatly help in games such as *Battlefield 3* when running on the Ultra settings at resolutions of 1920x1200 and above.

No, you haven't been Incepted. The inverted design tilts the guts 90 degrees to aid cooling.

Chip off the block

The Mach V's case is a custom job with a beautifully laser-cut, backlit Falcon Northwest logo in the door. The aluminum chassis is easy on the eyes, but it's hard on your deskspace. The size can be a plus though. Cramming too much hardware into a small box usually results in either overheating or unbearable fan noise. Even under heavy gaming loads, the Mach V was relatively quiet. I tried to melt the videocards and CPU with stress tests, but all I did was waste my time.

Performance with the SLI cards is outstanding, especially when compared to the budget box *PC Gamer* reviewed last month. The machine is capable of playing any game today without issue. The big question is whether it's worth it. There's a price premium for the LGA 2011 platform that's not always going to benefit the average gamer. But with games starting to take advantage of quad-cores now, a six-core machine future-proofs you. The six-cores also come in quite handy if you edit video, use 3D modeling applications, or do similar GPU-heavy tasks on your PC. The big question is if you work on your PC or just play. Falcon's illustrious name also adds to that cost, but as the OG in gaming PCs and a rep for superb service, it's worth it to those who want unbeatable speed and a safety net in case any hardware fails. ■

Gordon Mah Ung

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$5,609 ◆ www.falcon-nw.com ◆ Category: Dream

VERDICT

If your primary appeals are an eye toward future upgrades, existing top tech, and using your PC for more than just gaming, the Mach V is your soulmate.

PC GAMER 91

PHOTOS BY BARAK SHARAMA & ALEX CHOUSA

TESTED

Headset showdown

Are these new headsets worth your hard-earned cash? ***by Alex Castle***

There's a lot to love about a 5.1 speaker setup for PC gaming—there's the immersive surround sound, the heavy, thumping bass, the incredibly loud background music making it impossible to use a microphone, the sternly-worded letters of complaints from your upstairs, downstairs and next door neighbors...

Alright, so maybe some of those things aren't so great. That's why every gamer needs a decent headset, and because your headset is going to interpret how you receive half of the sensory input from your games, it'd better be a good one. As such, we've put two new sets through their paces, and we'll tell you which one's best for you.

Ear Force Z6A

Turtle Beach

Turtle Beach has been cranking out high-quality soundcards and headsets for gamers for a while now—long enough to know that the only way to really nail down surround sound in a headset is with multiple drivers, like those you'll find in the brawny Z6A.

Its big, heavily-padded earcups swivel and rock freely, so they fit perfectly over your ears no matter how abnormally-shaped your head might be. The headband isn't super cushioned, but it's flexible, so it's comfortable during extended play sessions. The mic boom is awesomely long and bendy, so you can get it just where you want it. Construction quality is good, and when you hold the headset in your hands, you feel like you've gotten your money's worth.

The amplifier dangles at waist level.

Hinges allow the Z6A to fold up into the headset equivalent of the fetal position.

Although the set itself is well-built, it's not without its problems. Chief among those is the way it connects to your computer. The Z6A comes with a teeny-tiny little cable with a connector that allows you to attach a longer cable and amplifier. The amplifier is kind of huge, and when connected, hangs about two and a half feet from the bottom of the headset. I appreciate the amount of control you get from amplifier and its four (four!) dials, but I still wish this heavy appendage wasn't dangling around at crotch-height while I wear the headset.

Additionally, the cable on the other side of the amplifier breaks into five connectors—three analog cables, a mic plug, and a USB cable for power. The analog plugs are necessary for the non-simulated 5.1 surround sound, of course, but it's a pain to manage and means you can't use the set in full 5.1 mode with a PC that doesn't have the required surround audio ports (this includes most gaming laptops). Fortunately, Turtle Beach's website offers a variety of adapters to suit any audio setup.

Sound off like ya gotta pair!

I'm all about comfort and convenience, but it's the sound quality that's most crucial. In that respect, the Z6A seesaws between fantastic and questionable. The mids and highs are clear and sound great, making it easy to hear the distant gunshots and crunching footsteps that can give you an advantage in games like *Modern Warfare 3*. The four drivers in each ear enhance the direction of all sounds—another boon for competitive gamers.

Unfortunately, the set's bass response is lacking, and the associated lack of depth and warmth makes these cans less ideal for music and movies. The Z6A is marketed as a gaming headset first and foremost, so I can't really fault them too much for it, but if media usage is a big part of your PC, you can get a more well-rounded headset for the money. ■

PC GAMER 80

◆ *$100* ◆ *www.turtlebeach.com* ◆ *Category: Mid*

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GameCom 777

Plantronics

The GameCom 777 is a comfortable headset with velvet-covered foam around the earcups and on the headband, though the earcups don't swivel much, and the headset squeezes a little too tightly for my liking. If you've got a smaller head, you'll probably be fine, but I found that the area under my ears started to hurt after playing for more than an hour or so (not a dealbreaker, but irritating). When you're not using the set's boom mic, you can retract it a bit, and it tucks up neatly into the headband, out of sight and out of mind.

Although the GameCom gets a pass on comfort (more or less), the build quality really leaves something to be desired. The whole thing is built out of a cheap, hollow-feeling plastic and it's a uniformly ugly grey. The thin plastic of the headband is particularly worrying—I've had sturdier-feeling sets break on me before. The cable's a nice, thick, texturized rubber, but the in-line remote and optional USB dongle are similarly flimsy feeling. It's not a massive inconvenience, but this isn't a set that you're going to want to show off at a LAN party.

If you've got a smaller head, you'll probably be fine, but I found that the area under my ears started to hurt after an hour or so.

Pump up the volume

For extras, the GameCom isn't setting any records. The aforementioned in-line remote has only a mute switch and volume controls. I like that it uses a wheel-style volume knob, but again, it's so flimsy that I feel like it might break. However, this headset does have a pretty badass innovation—a detachable USB dongle, meaning it can be used either as a plain analog headset, or as a USB device. This is great for gamers with a dedicated sound card (or high-end motherboard) at home, who want to be able to take the headset on the road and still get some rudimentary sound acceleration.

In terms of the audio, the GameCom performs well for a headset in this price range. Mids and highs are nice and crisp, and voices in games and movies are strong and clear. The bass response is respectable, though it's a tiny bit muddy, with some of the low-end details and textures losing out. The mic is also perfectly serviceable, and performed just fine for in-game voice chat and Skype.

The USB dongle provides virtual Dolby 5.1 surround, though as with most USB headsets the effect isn't nearly as sweet as what you get from a dedicated soundcard. It's better than nothing, but not worth forking over extra bills if you've already got a soundcard or motherboard with passable sound hardware.

Sadly though, The GameCom 777 just doesn't have what it takes to stand out from the pack. If you find it on sale, I wouldn't recommend against it—it's a reasonably comfortable headset with better-than-average audio quality. But with cheap materials, it's not quite worth 75 bucks. ■

PC GAMER 76

◆ *$75* ◆ *www.plantronics.com* ◆ *Category: Mid*

PHOTOS BY BARAK SHARAMA & ALEX CHOUSA

Rosewill RK-9000

Utilitarian and pricey

Make no mistake, the RK-9000 is an unapologetically barebones keyboard, concerned only with getting your fingers on the keys as easily as possible. It's covered in a flat black finish, not overly large, and pretty easy on the eyes. It's also got some sweet, full-sized keys that pop-up like the connector prongs on a LEGO brick. But there are no other bells and whistles here—no media playback keys, backlit buttons or extra USB ports. Its only stand-outs are three bright LED indicator lights for Caps Lock, Number and Scroll Lock. That's it.

Although they're obscenely loud, mechanical keyboards such as this one are worthwhile if you're worried about tiring out your fingertips. The RK-9000 requires less force in key-presses, which is immensely helpful when you're jamming away at WASD in *WoW* and *TF2*.

Although they're loud, mechanical keyboards are worthwhile if you're worried about tired fingertips.

Even better, none of my actions were ever lost no matter how frantically I mashed the keys: the RK-9000 detects up to six simultaneous key-strokes to avoid dropped characters.

Ergonomically speaking, the keyboard's raised profile is a comfortable fit if you're keeping your fingers glued to your board while gaming. But if you're writing a thesis during your off-time, you better bring your own wrist-rest. Oftentimes, my digits got achy from typing all over the place trying to reach various keys, so smaller hands will find some difficulty adjusting to the size and shape.

Overall, the RK-9000 is a serviceable keyboard. If it weren't for the astronomical price, I'd easily recommend it to everyone. But as stands, there are just too many other mechanical keyboards that give you more (such as USB ports and contoured keys), and don't cost a whole Benjamin. ■ ***Florence Ion***

PC GAMER 75

$100 ◆ www.rosewill.com ◆ Category: Entry

Q&A

Buying new hardware: it's a couples thing

Q: My experience with computers begins and ends with a bit of surfing, and using Microsoft Office while I'm at work. My girlfriend is another story: she's a hardcore PC gamer with a wicked competitive streak. Lately, she's been complaining that her computer is having problems playing newer games and that it's time for her to upgrade. I want to buy her a new computer as a gift but I don't know where to start. Any suggestions?

Nothing says "I love you" like a wicked fast processor.

A: *It's great to see that you not only tolerate but also support your partner's PC gaming addiction! But blinging her out with the latest computational sexy isn't as simple as picking up the most expensive rig on the market: It takes time and research. What kinds of games does she like to play? Would she benefit from the purchase of accessories such as a flight stick, racing wheel, or a 3D monitor? Is the computer she currently owns worth upgrading or is it old enough that you'd be better off starting from scratch? These are things you should know before running out to buy anything. You might even want to consider involving your girlfriend in the selection process. Not only will it allow you gain a little more insight into what she requires to realize gaming nirvana, but she may already have a few ideas of her own on what to buy, taking a lot of the pain out of the shopping experience. Heck, if you're lucky, it might even strengthen the bond between you!*

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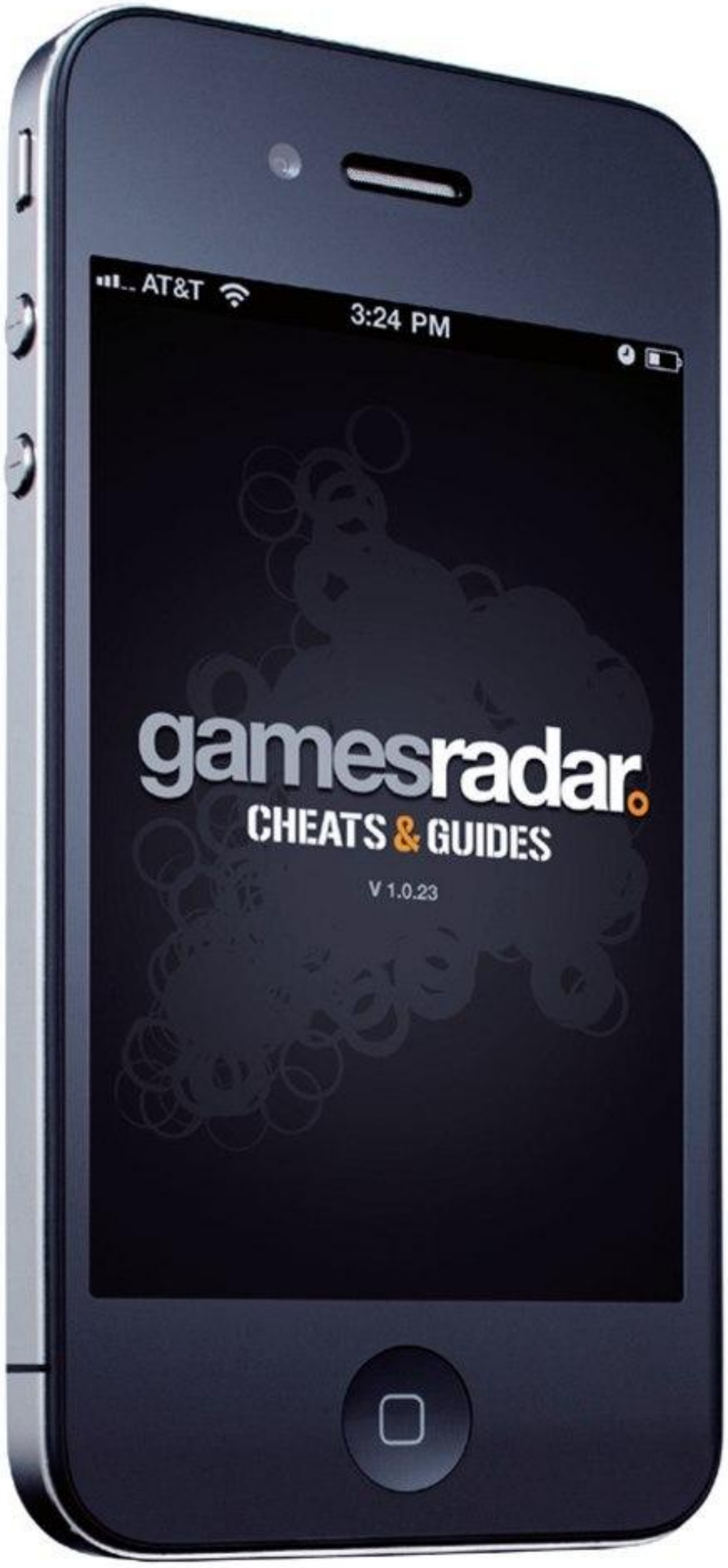

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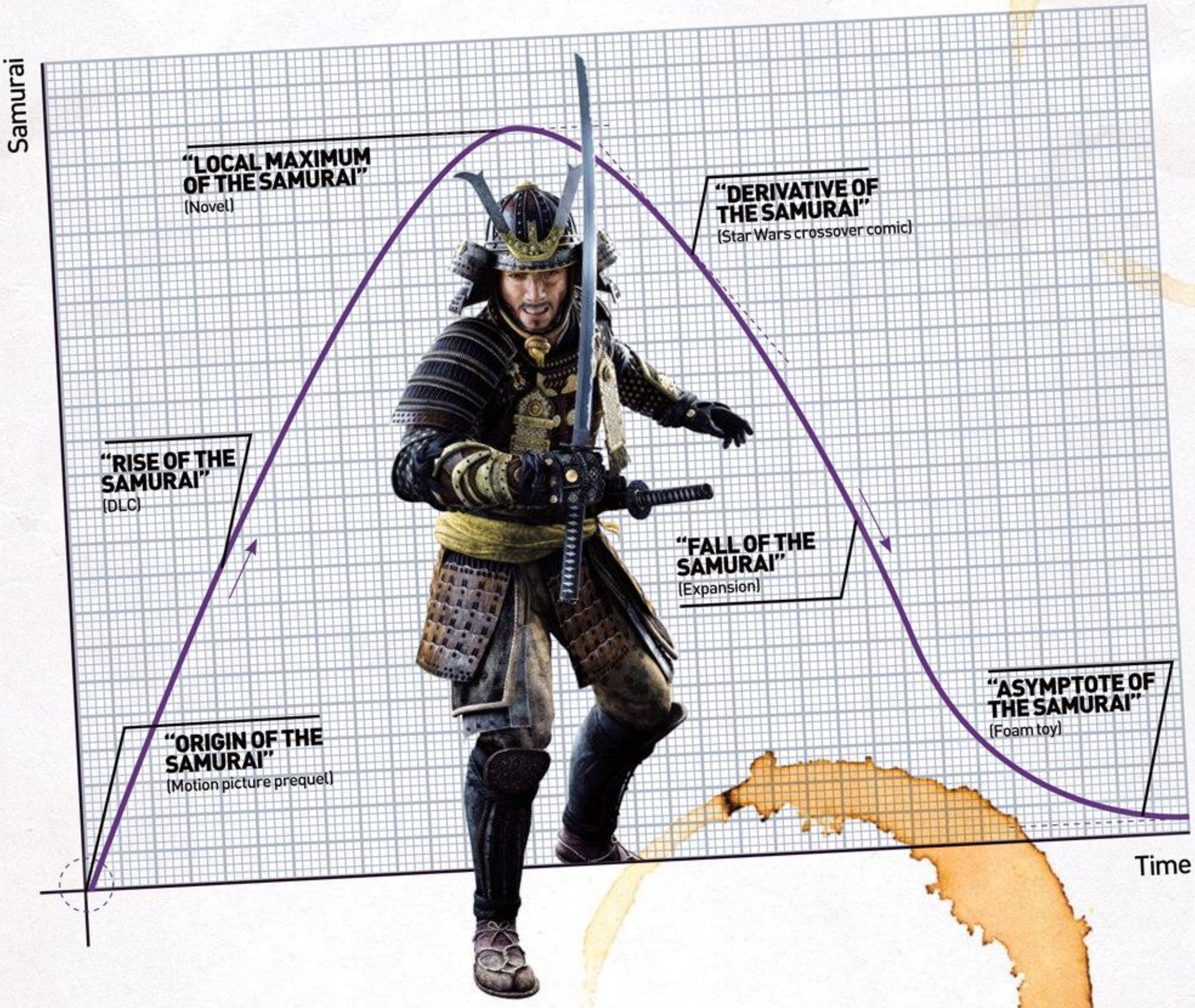

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